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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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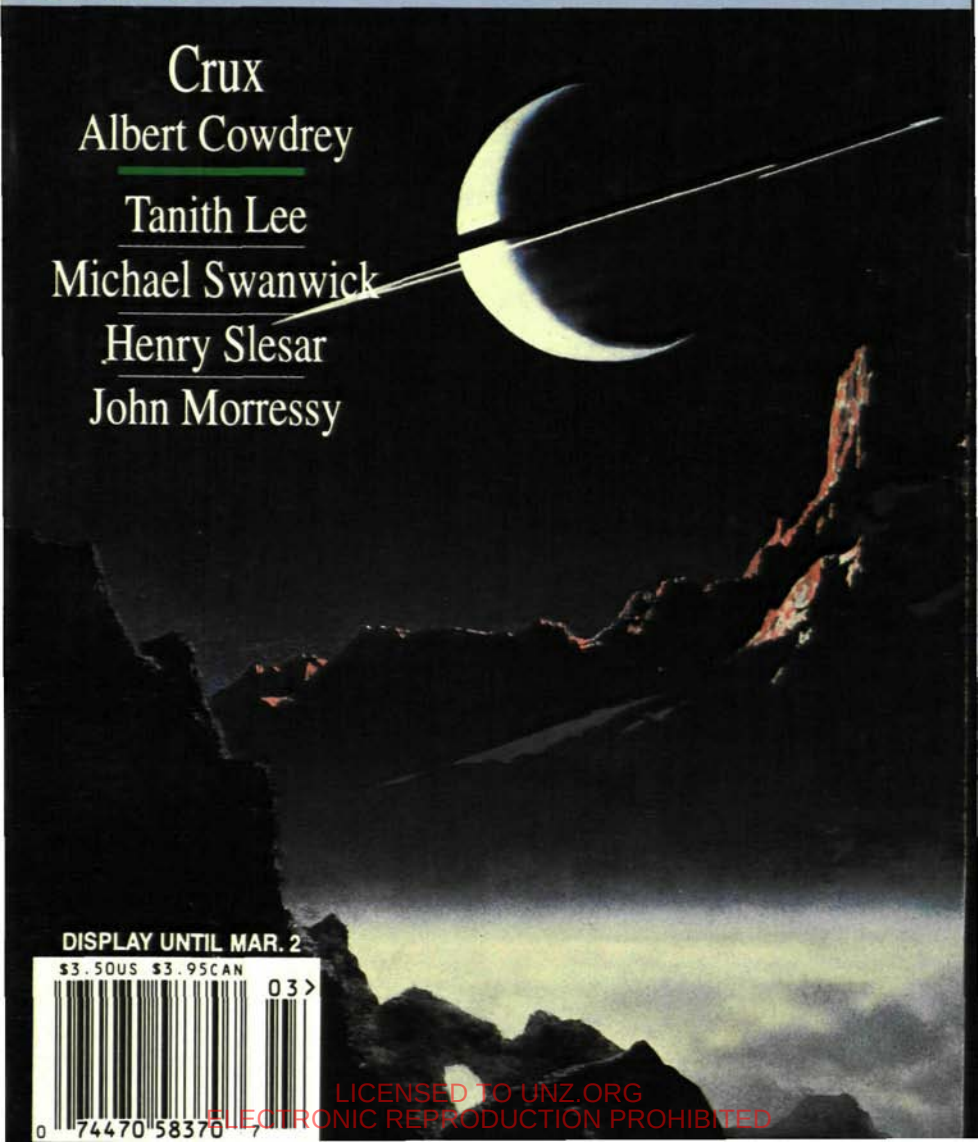

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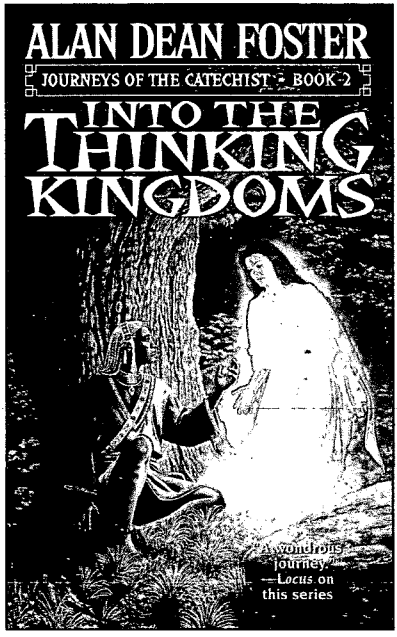

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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March • 51st Year of Publication

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New technologies always bring new wrinkles on old problems. Here's a story that takes the current cell phone craze a bit farther—with wild results. (But is the technology all that new? Mr. Heller notes that a student of William James's by the name of Edmund Jacobson was playing around with electrical potentials in the larynx and "the inner voice" back in 1927.)

Rick Heller is a computer programmer who lives in the Boston area. He confesses that his job gives him access to such military secrets as the US Marine Corps's recipe for pizza burgers. This story is his first published work.

Loyal Puppies

By Rick Heller

HOW'S THIS FOR AN AD FOR Telepathy™?

"You're bound and gagged in the trunk of a car. The guy behind the wheel is going to kill you. You can't scream. You can't move. What do you do? Just think the words, 'WellCell on, WellCell Dial 911 Dial.' Your call will be instantly transmitted to the local police. Rescue will be moments away."

That's what the commercial would say.

But what if the jeremy who kidnapped you removed the transmitter from your neck before he stuffed you in the trunk? That's what happened to me and to Gwen, my best friend. No, I don't think Wells Cellular is going to be using me in their ads any time soon. Especially since it was a bug in their software that got me in trouble in the first place.

It's funny. I'd pestered my mom. "Gwen's mother says she can have Telepathy. Why can't I?" The whining got me nowhere. Then Dad said he'd pay for it, so I could call home in case of an emergency.

Dr. Feinberg installed jacks in my ears and neck. She numbed the

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areas first with these medicated patches. I was awake the whole time. The ear jacks, she told me, connect to a nerve that runs from the ear to the brain. The neck jack connects to a nerve that goes to the vocal cords and tongue and lips and stuff.

A couple of weeks after the surgery, Gwen and I went back to Dr. Feinberg to get our chips. You plug them into the jacks to make Telepathy™ work. Wearing them doesn't look dooby at all, because they're hidden inside jewelry. I chose a pair of turquoise and silver earrings to hold the ear chips, and a matching choker for my neck. I like to wear turquoise; it looks fab with my blonde hair.

Gwen has chestnut-brown hair. She picked gold earrings with a swirly kind of design, and for the neckpiece, a 24-karat gold brooch. Hers were maximum expensive. I don't mind that her family has more money than mine, though. I get two looks from guys for every one that she gets. That's more important than money.

Telepathy™ did take some getting used to. When you hear another person's thoughts, they sound like they come from inside you. It was tricky telling my thoughts apart from Gwen's, at first. After a while, though, I just knew.

The chips are mini cell phones, basically. You can call other people with Telepathy™ or even people with regular phone numbers. They were working great, until the day Gwen went to a cookout with her parents.

The cookout had something to do with her father's business. I sat around my house, snacking too much, while Gwen gave me the play-by-play.

"Oh, God, you won't believe this," Gwen was thinking. "There's this ancient woman wearing a red bikini. She's sitting at the edge of the pool with her feet in the water. The way her skin is hanging down from her stomach — it reminds me of making pizza — you know, the way dough hangs when you're stretching it."

"Dooby!" I thought. "Ever hear of a 'tummy tuck'?"

"Are you still in Brazil?"

"Brazil? What do you mean?" I thought.

"You're in L.A.?"

"Of course I'm in L.A.? Earth to Gwen!"

"You're not making any sense, Denyssa."

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"Neither are you," I thought.

"No, I don't think getting together would be a good idea."

"Gwen, are you being weird? I can't take this. I'm going for a swim. Talk to you later. WellCell Off."

"WellCell" is a keyword. It tells the chip to listen for an instruction. That's so you don't make a call by accident. Like if "chocolate" was a keyword, you'd make a call every time you thought of Dove Bars.

I changed into a black bikini, proud that my belly was nearly flat. I popped my chips out and laid them on the bureau. They're "water-resistant" but not waterproof, which means you won't get electrocuted if you go in the pool with them, but they might not work as well afterward.

I swam laps, then floated on my back for about fifteen minutes. Not having my chips in felt like I'd lost my voice — like I had laryngitis.

It's amazing that the chips can read your mind. Dr. Feinberg called it "inner voice recognition." The brain's sending signals to the vocal cords, she said, even when you're thinking to yourself. It's a very tiny amount, much less than when you're actually talking, but enough for the chips to figure out what's going on in your head.

I dried myself off, went back inside, popped the chips back in and called Gwen. "WellCell On," I thought. "WellCell Speed Dial One Dial."

Gwen answered. "Thank God you called. I'm so bored. I'm counting the number of times the word 'fiduciary' has come up in conversation. I'm at five."

We chatted for maybe a half-hour. "If you were stuck on a desert island," I asked her, "and there could only be one store, what would you want it to be?"

"Arturo, why are you calling me again?" Her answer didn't make sense.

"Gwen, are you fantasizing about some guy?" I thought.

"Denyssa, where did you get...." The rest was garbled.

"Gwen, it's maximum strange. It's like I'm hearing two conversations at once. I'm hearing you and someone else."

"I'm not hearing anybody else," Gwen thought. "Maybe there's a problem with your chips."

"I thought we hashed this out."

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"Did you just say, 'I thought we hashed this out?'"

"No. It wasn't me. But it sounds — "

"Gwen, will you shut up for a second so I can listen?"

I was hearing one side of a conversation, in spurts. Sometimes I'd hear something. Sometimes there'd be silence.

"Oh, dinner at Koka's. It's tempting, but I'd have to say no. Why don't you ask one of your other women?"

"Some guy named Arturo just asked this woman to Koka's," I thought. "And she turned him down."

"I would die to be taken to Koka's. Just lay my body out on the dessert table." That was obviously Gwen thinking.

"I don't believe you can change. Because you're Arturo Jansen, you think you can have any woman you want."

"You're not going to believe this," I thought. "She said, 'Because you're Arturo Jansen, you think you can have any woman you want.'"

"*The* Arturo Jansen?"

"How many could there be?"

I heard this shriek inside my head. Was it her or me?

It was both of us.

"He was so awesome in 'Poker Player,'" Gwen thought. "The way he beat up that loan shark...."

The woman Arturo was talking to kept turning him down, again and again. Meanwhile. I searched through the back issues I had in my closet of *Hollywood Weekly*. I found Arturo among the "new faces to watch" in the March issue.

Arturo had these incredible hazel eyes with dark lashes, and dark brown hair that reached to his shoulders. He was pictured with his girlfriend, a slender blonde named Palma Horvath. According to the article, his next role was as an air cavalry officer in the remake of *Apocalypse Now*. It was going to be filmed in Brazil.

"He's the Sun!" I thought.

"He's beyond the Sun," Gwen thought.

"I bet Palma's the one he's talking to right now."

"How could anyone turn down a date with Arturo? It's not possible," Gwen thought. "Denyssa, are you making this up?"

"Swear to God!"

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"All right, Arturo. I'll meet you at the door at Koka's at seven tonight!"

"Hold on. Palma just gave in," I thought. "They're getting together tonight."

"I don't believe a word you're saying," Gwen thought. It was just Gwen and me now. The other conversation was over.

"I can prove it," I thought. "Tell your parents you're coming over to my house tonight, and we'll go to Koka's."

"Koka's won't take our reservation."

"I didn't mean that. We'll stake out the parking lot."

We squealed again in unison.

This was going to be so icy!

Gwen came over and picked me up in the Thunderbird her parents gave her for a birthday present. We got to Koka's a few minutes before seven. Since it was summer, there was still plenty of daylight left.

Koka's had valet service, so we didn't even try to park there. The medical building next door had a parking lot that was practically empty. Gwen found a spot that looked out toward the restaurant, but was shielded by bushes. We took turns focusing on the entrance with Gwen's binocular-camera.

I was on duty when Palma Horvath pulled up in a new Packard. She was blonde and willowy, exactly like the photo. A guy met her at the door. It was so quick, I hardly got a chance to focus before they were gone. I took a snapshot with the bino-camera, though, and we examined the image.

"It's Arturo, all right," Gwen said. "I will never doubt you again."

"What do you want to do now?"

"Let's wait till they come out," Gwen said.

"Okay."

We split a pack of M&M's while we waited. Gwen said, "I hope he doesn't get back together with her. I want him for myself. When I have an apartment of my own, I see him coming to the door with a heart-shaped box of chocolate — it's Valentine's Day — and a dozen red roses."

"No, Gwen. We're going to be roommates. You answer the door, and it's Arturo, dressed in a tuxedo, but you're just wearing sweatpants, because he's come to pick *me* up. He's taking me to the Academy Awards, where he's been nominated. I'm wearing this beautiful red dress with slits

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down the sides. He wins the best actor award, and leans over and kisses me. The cameras focus on me, Denyssa Reilly, and I appear on TV all around the world."

"Fat chance," Gwen said. "You'd be such a fashion casualty that everyone in the world would flip the channel."

We had so much fun imagining our lives together with Arturo, we almost missed seeing Palma Horvath call for her car. It was like three-quarters of an hour after she arrived. We waited to see if Arturo would join her, but she drove off alone. Arturo didn't come for his car for another fifteen or twenty minutes.

Gwen started up her Thunderbird. "I'm going to follow him."

"Icy!" I said "Let's get back on-line. Maybe I can hear something."

Gwen and I had to be on-line for me to hear anything. I figured this out earlier, when Gwen called me up, and I immediately started hearing some guy talking to Arturo about a script. It was clear the conversation had been going on for a while.

So even though we were sitting next to each other in her Thunderbird, we got on-line. My father would think it extravagant, but so what — he's got a lot of money.

We followed Arturo's red Saab convertible from about half a block behind. Gwen went through two red lights in order to keep up. Once he got onto Santa Monica Boulevard, he made a call.

"Arturo! Haven't heard from you in a while, hombre."

Obviously, he wasn't speaking to Palma.

"Rio's great. Especially around Carnival."

Then there was a lull, and then I heard, "Oh, that's too bad. She'll come around.... You want some Blue Death? How much?... Okay. I gotta make another stop first.... I'll be over at your place around nine. Ciao."

"Blue Death. Isn't that some kind of synthetic?" I asked Gwen.

"Yeah."

"Someone's making a dominos at Arturo's tonight."

"It's icy to know a star's secrets," Gwen thought.

"Yeah. It's like we're his best friends, and he's telling us stuff."

We followed him all the way home. We saw him turn into a driveway. By the time we passed by, the gates were closing.

"Why don't I pull over?" Gwen thought.

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"He's probably in for the night. Besides, his friend's coming over and might spot us. Why don't we come back tomorrow?"

So that's what we did. We followed him for the next several evenings. It was funny. For a movie star, he didn't have much of a social life. I guess you could've said that about us too. But Gwen and I were teenagers. We had an excuse.

One night, we followed him to a residential area near U.C.L.A. He suddenly pulled over. We were afraid he'd seen us. We kept on going. If he saw us, he didn't mention it when he called Palma.

"No, Arturo. You have to learn to let go," she said. "You could meet someone tomorrow. I'm not that special, believe me."

"What's wrong with her?" Gwen thought. "He's so dreamy."

We followed him the next evening, this time staying far back. When we got to this one intersection, he went through a yellow light. It turned red before we got to it.

"Go through it, Gwen," I thought.

Cars started across from the other direction.

Gwen screamed, and slammed on the brakes. "Sorry," she said aloud. "I guess we lost him."

Then I caught a very brief exchange between Palma and Arturo. "Don't come over here!" she said. "This is starting to get weird, Arturo. You need to go back to your therapist." Then she hung up.

"He called Palma again," I thought. "She's through with him."

"You know, we came this way last night," Gwen thought. "I bet I could find where he went. Look for a Dandelion Donuts. That's where we turn."

Sure enough, after a mile or two, there was a Dandelion Donuts. Gwen swung a hard right. It was a residential street, and we continued on it for several blocks. There was Arturo's Saab, parked haphazardly in front of a beige house with purple shutters.

"Voilà!" Gwen thought.

We parked a discreet distance away, and waited. Arturo came out of the house about a half an hour later. He looked around in all directions as he opened the door of his Saab. We slumped down.

"Do you think he saw us?" I thought.

"I hope not."

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By the time we sat up again, he'd disappeared.

"Sure you can come over," I heard a voice say.

"He's not going home, Gwen," I thought.

"What kind of problem?... You can count on me, hombre.... I'll back you up. I'm your loyal puppy, Arturo. I only shit on your newspaper."

I laughed when I heard that line. I relayed it to Gwen and she put a finger down her throat.

We went to Ollie's Pizza afterward. While we were waiting for our food, Gwen kicked me under the table and said, "I'm your loyal puppy, Denyssa. I only shit on your newspaper."

When the cute waiter came with the pizza, I told him, "We're loyal puppies. We shit only on your placemats."

We both cracked up. He must have thought we were dooby.

The next day was weird. I was having dinner by the TV, watching "Tunesville." At the news break, they said that the body of Palma Horvath had been found. She'd been stabbed multiple times with her own kitchen knives.

Hearing about a murder is a great appetite suppressant. They showed the picture of the house, and it was the beige one with the shutters we'd seen Arturo come out of.

I immediately called Gwen and told her to turn on the TV. "I bet he killed her," I thought.

"Bullshit. It was some burglar."

"He was there last night."

"Well, thank God he didn't spend the night with her or he'd be dead too."

"I bet you he did it."

"You are so wrong, Denyssa."

We followed the story religiously over the next few days. The police said they had no leads, but didn't think it was a burglary. An autopsy fixed the time of death at approximately 9:30 P.M. on the night before the body was discovered.

"He did it!" I thought. "That's exactly when we saw him at the house."

"Wrong! It was like 8:57 or something. It certainly wasn't after nine."

"Close enough," I thought.

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"Doesn't prove anything."

"That guy, C.J., said they were together all evening. We know that's not true. He's the loyal puppy."

Gwen had no comeback. I was sure I'd won the point. But I wished I knew what she was thinking. You see, having Telepathy™ doesn't mean you can hear every single word someone thinks. God, no! Gwen and I would have had so many fights. Dr. Feinberg said there's an "inhibitory circuit" wired from the nerves to the chips. I don't understand it, but basically, you have to *want* your thoughts to go out.

"He couldn't have done anything so horrible," Gwen said, after quite a bit of silence. "Arturo's not like that."

"We don't know him," I thought. I couldn't believe she was still defending the guy.

"Maybe that's the problem," Gwen thought. "He must be feeling terribly lonely without Palma. We know how much he wanted to be with her."

"Well, she didn't want to be with him."

"He needs some support now. Someone to lean on."

I laughed. "He's got C.J.!"

"He needs a woman, Denyssa."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"Me, of course. But I'd want you to come along too."

"What if he fell in love with me and not you," I thought. "Palma was blonde."

"He might be in the mood for a brunette now."

"This is the doobiest idea you've ever come up with, Gwen. This guy's a murderer."

"He is not. I wish you'd stop saying that. If he's a murderer, how come he hasn't been arrested?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you don't. Well, I'm going to find some way to meet him, whether you come with me or not."

I didn't know what to do. It seemed like a bad idea. But Gwen was my best friend. I could be totally wrong about Arturo. And if he was dangerous, she'd be better off with me by her side, watching out for her.

I always end up giving in to Gwen.

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We spent days plotting how to meet Arturo. "We could ram his car with your Thunderbird," I suggested. Gwen didn't like that idea.

Then I overheard a conversation between Arturo and his agent. "I was having lunch with a producer who's a trustee of Children's Hospital of Pasadena," the agent said, "They're having a benefit for neuromuscular transplantation. They want a celebrity to appear.... This would be good for you, Arturo.... There's sympathy out there for you because of Palma's passing. By raising your profile tastefully — I'm talking tastefully — we may give you a shot at some leading roles."

That's where we ended up meeting Arturo — at a charity event. Arturo put on a mime act for the kids. He made believe he was a lion, then an elephant, and then a seal. He made those poor kids so happy for an afternoon.

"He's adorable," Gwen whispered to me.

Later, there was a crush of people hoping to get his autograph. We knew we only had a few seconds to make an impression.

"Hi," Gwen said. "We love your movies."

"Thanks."

"We're sorry about Palma," I said.

"Thank you."

"We're your greatest fans. We know everything," Gwen said. "And we love you."

Gwen slipped a note in his shirt pocket. It was a love letter signed by the two of us. It contained both our Telepathy™ numbers.

Gwen lowered her voice to a whisper, "You could even say we're your loyal puppies, and we only shit on your newspaper."

Arturo's eyes widened. He looked like he was about to say something, but the big shots at the hospital made us move on.

An hour later, though, after we had arrived back at Gwen's house, she got a telepathy call. She didn't say anything, but I could tell from her expression she was talking to someone.

"It's Arturo," Gwen shrieked. "He wants to know if we want to party!"

We both screamed. I didn't know what I was getting myself mixed up in, but it was hard not to be excited.

We arrived at Arturo's at twilight. At the gate, we didn't even have to

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press a button. The camera focused on the driver's side window, and we said, "Hi, it's Gwen and Denyssa." The gate swung open.

The house was two stories, with whitewashed walls and a red-tile roof. Arturo appeared at the door in shorts and a yellow T-shirt. He was barefoot. Gwen parked on the red brick patio.

Gwen had on a blue halter top and a Giverny miniskirt. I wore a little black dress and sheer black nylons. We strutted up to the door.

"Hi, Arturo."

"Come on in."

We stepped inside.

"Denyssa, can you believe it?" Gwen thought. "We're hanging with a movie star!"

"This is maximum icy. Even if he is a murderer, he's a gorgeous one."

We were on-line with each other, so we could make comments without Arturo overhearing us.

We followed him to a small room that looked out onto the garden. "This is the living room," Arturo said.

"I love it," Gwen said.

"You've got a great decorator," I added.

We sat down on Arturo's love seat.

"Where are you guys from?"

"We're not in high school, Denyssa!" Gwen thought.

"We share an apartment in West Hollywood," I said.

"Do you want a beer?"

"That would be great," Gwen said.

He disappeared into the kitchen.

"Did you see the look he gave me?" Gwen thought. "He was undressing me."

"I got the same look," I thought. "It lasted longer."

"You're such a liar."

Arturo returned, carrying a tray with three bottles of beer and three tall glasses. He opened each bottle and poured the beer into a glass. As he handed me a glass, he told me, "You are a beautiful woman."

I felt flushed. "He thinks I'm beautiful," I thought.

"And you are exquisite," he said to Gwen.

"I'd rather be exquisite than beautiful," Gwen thought.

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He sat down.

"I'm a big fan of yours," Gwen said.

"I'm a huge fan. I've seen all your movies," I added.

"I'm the bigger fan," Gwen said. "The poster I have in my room is bigger than Denyssa's."

"You're quite a pair." Arturo smiled. "That line you used with the puppies, how did that go?"

"We're your loyal puppies. We only shit on your newspaper," Gwen said.

"I like it. Did you hear it from somebody, or did you make it up yourself?"

"It's a line from a movie," Gwen said. "Wasn't it in *The Godfather*?"

"Gwen, you are so stupid," I said. "It's from *101 Dalmatians*."

"No, you're stupid. It was definitely *The Godfather*."

"Now, ladies. It doesn't really matter. I was just curious. You said that you know everything. What did you mean by that? That you've read all about me in the fan magazines?"

"Oh, we know more than that," Gwen said.

"But we would never tell anyone," I added.

"Please don't leave me in suspense," Arturo said.

"We overhear your Telepathy," Gwen said. "That's how we heard about loyal puppies. It's not really a line from *The Godfather*."

Arturo nervously placed his glass down on the end table. He looked stunned. "You overhear my Telepathy?"

"Gwen can't hear anything. Only I can."

Arturo shook his head.

"If you don't believe us, try calling the guy you get your drugs from," Gwen said.

"You know about that too?" Arturo fell silent. Then he cracked a smile. "Wait a second. Did C.J. put you up to this?"

"We've never met him," I said.

"I know you're putting me on. I'll call C.J. right now."

I heard C.J. answer, "How are you doing, hombre?"

I repeated, "How you doing, hombre?"

I don't know what Arturo asked him, but C.J. answered, "I screwed six women in five days."

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I laughed. "He said he screwed six women in five days."

"Holy shit," Arturo said audibly.

Arturo wrapped up the conversation with C.J. Then he asked me, "How do you do this?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess there's something wrong with my chip."

"Don't worry," Gwen said. "We respect your privacy."

"I guess I should feel thankful for that."

"We know about you being at Palma's that last night," Gwen said. "See, we've been following you. But we're loyal, just like C.J."

Arturo got up and began pacing around the room. "A lot of women can't keep a secret. They have to tell their friends."

"We tell our secrets to each other," I said. Gwen nodded in agreement.

"A lot of people might even pay for stories about me."

"Don't worry," I said. "Our families are rich. We don't need money."

"What do you want, then?"

"We want to be with you," Gwen said.

"You didn't tell your friends you were partying with me tonight?"

"No," I said.

"Your parents?"

"Nobody," Gwen said. "We understand the meaning of the word confidential."

Arturo squeezed in between us on the love seat. He put his arms around us.

"Okay. You can hang with me as long as you keep it quiet." Then he kissed each of us on the lips. I felt my legs go soft.

We drank some more, and we talked about his movies. After a while, we were feeling maximum comfortable. I was wondering if he was going to have sex with both of us together. We'd never done that before.

Instead he asked us, "Do you guys want to do some Blue Death?"

"Gwen," I thought. "What do we say?"

"Sure," Gwen said.

Arturo opened a bottle of champagne, and poured it into fluted glasses. He mixed in a blue powder. "You have to drink it all at once." Arturo watched us as we both downed our glasses.

Before I finished it, I felt sweaty. Then, major nausea. I don't know

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how much time passed while I was out of it. The next thing I'm sure of, I felt a jolt. I was thrown against something hard. My neck hurt — I mean, really hurt.

I was alert now, though I still felt dizzy. I could feel a warm body at my side, and I knew it had to be Gwen. She wasn't moving at all.

We were in some sort of dark chamber. There was music though, loud Razor music — I'm not sure which band — coming from all around. I tried to speak, but I couldn't open my mouth. Something was covering it. I couldn't tell what it was, because I couldn't move my arms. I couldn't move my legs either, for that matter.

I tried Telepathy™. "WellCell on," I thought.

But for the first time, I didn't hear a dial tone.

God damn it, I thought. What's wrong with this? "WellCell on. WellCell on."

My Telepathy™ wasn't working! I couldn't believe it.

I lay there for a while, confused. I assumed I was hallucinating, but as time went on, I became more and more certain I wasn't.

The second jolt convinced me. Earthquake! We're trapped under debris. Either that, I thought, or we're in the trunk of a car. There was a bump, and then another bump. There was a whole series of them. This was like no earthquake I'd ever felt. We were in the trunk of a moving car.

I suddenly felt a chill: We're such idiots, I thought. Arturo drugged us and then stuffed us in the trunk of his car. He's going to murder us, just like he did Palma. "WellCell on. WellCell on." But it wouldn't come on.

Sobbing, I struggled to free my arms. They were bound with sticky stuff, maybe duct tape or something. There was a ragged end, and I got it started. I was able to unwind it to the point where I could separate my hands.

Ha, I thought. Arturo's character in *Deadbeat* would have tied a better knot.

Once my hands were free, I ripped the tape off my mouth. Ouch! I shook Gwen, and peeled the tape off her mouth, but she didn't come to.

Oh, my God. Maybe she's dead, I thought. Lying on my side, I brought my knees up to my chest, and unwound the tape from my legs. As I flicked the tape off my fingers, I happened to touch my throat. All I felt was skin. My choker was gone, and with it, my Telepathy™ chip.

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I went insane. I kicked wildly. I tried to break the trunk lock, but broke a heel instead. My new black pumps — trashed, and I didn't even care.

I clawed at the lining of the bottom of the trunk. I was hoping it wasn't metal underneath, and I could tunnel my way out. I tugged at the fabric until it ripped. Good, I thought. At least if Arturo kills us, he'll have to get his trunk reupholstered.

I grabbed onto some electrical wires. That's when I remembered something I learned from a TV movie. That little lever next to the driver's seat that opens the trunk lock — there's a wire that runs from the lever to the lock. If you break the wire, the lock opens.

That's what I did. I kept tugging and tugging until I heard a pop. I gave the trunk lid a gentle nudge, and it gave way. I looked back at Gwen and gave her a shove. There was no sign of life. I knew if I didn't jump now, I was dead. If I tried to drag her along, we'd be caught, and we'd both be dead. My best chance, and Gwen's, was for me to get help on my own.

I sprang up, lifting open the trunk lid, and jumped out. I fell onto what was a dirt road. I rolled downhill for fifteen or twenty feet, and came to a halt underneath a bush. I was all scratched up. I felt something sticky on my lips. Oh, my God, I thought. I'm bleeding.

My shoes were gone, but I stood up. I didn't know where the hell I was, except I was in my stocking feet in the middle of a wilderness. I was in some kind of canyon, probably in one of the California State Parks.

I could see in the dark easily, thanks to having been in the trunk for so long. There was a hill over to my right outlined against a hazy glow. I figured that was probably the street lights of L.A. reflecting in the smog.

I wasn't sure if I could walk, but when I heard the Saab screech to a halt and shift into reverse, I decided to run. I plunged into the bushes. There were no trees to hide behind, but there was plenty of scrub brush.

After I had gotten away from the dirt road, I shifted from speedy to sneaky mode. I went down on my hands and knees, and crawled through the brush as quietly as I could.

As the ground started sloping upward, I got up off my knees into a crouch. I slipped for a second on loose gravel. I didn't scream, though. I don't know how I avoided it; usually, if I got a paper cut, I'd be babbling about it with Gwen for ten minutes.

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I heard the throbbing of an engine. Peeking through the scrub, I saw the car, its headlights pointing back down the road. He'd turned the Saab around. Arturo was out of the car, peering into the darkness. The red tail lights reflecting off his face made him look like the psycho in *Slit Skirt*. And to think I liked that movie!

As I continued up the hill, I kept telling myself not to stand up when I reached the top; he'd be able to spot me against the smoggy glow of L.A. I crawled on my belly the last ten feet. By the time I was safely on the other side, my dress was all slimy.

I could now see a line of houses along a ribbon that might have been a county road. There was a smaller road snaking up from the main highway into the hills. I wondered if the dirt road branched off of that.

I bounded down the hill until I slipped and nearly sprained my ankle. As I stopped to rub my ankle, I looked back toward the top, dreading the moment when Arturo would appear. But there was no sign of him.

I was feeling happy as I limped down the hill. Gimp or not, I was going to live. At the base, I pushed my way through the last stretch of brush. Then I saw a fence. At first, I thought it was barbed wire. It wasn't, but then I wondered, what if it's electrified? I pictured my hair frizzing up like Ms. Frankenstein.

I touched the fence lightly, expecting a jolt. It felt a little damp, but otherwise perfectly harmless. I was being paranoid. You get that way after you've been kidnapped.

So there I was climbing a fence in my little black dress. If that wasn't enough to make me feel self-conscious, the fence started to give. Before I knew it, the fence post keeled over and I flipped forward onto the ground. This is hell, I thought, as I lay sprawled on the soft grass. Am I that much of a moo?

I lifted myself up, and jogged across the grass. A spotlight flicked on, set off by a motion detector. With the light in my eyes, I dashed past the pool and the car port and across the small front yard.

I scrambled up a flight of redwood steps to the front door. The house was dark. I rang the bell but there was no answer. I rang it again and pounded on the window pane, trying to make as big a racket as I could. Nothing.

I needed to get to a phone. I stepped back down to the front yard.

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Neighboring homes also seemed to be dark. What time was it, I wondered. Had everyone gone to bed?

One house across the road seemed to have a light on. I stepped toward it. Then I noticed a car approaching in the distance. Its lights were very bright. Was it Arturo, searching for me?

I backed away from the road and decided to break into the house. I looked around the yard for something I could use. There was a planter, but it looked too heavy for me. Then I noticed a wooden stake with a sign hanging from it. It said, "The Silva's." I gave the stake a good tug. That loosened it, and with a second yank, the stake came out of the earth.

The headlights were getting nearer. I raced to the picture window, dragging the stake behind me. I was about to shatter the glass when the car pulled into the driveway, its lights blinding me.

I'm dead, I thought. I was so close to being alive.

A man stepped out of the still-running car. In a booming voice, he said, "What are you doing on the Silva's property?"

Whoever it was, it wasn't Arturo. Was it his drug dealer friend? I didn't know what he sounded like in person. Well, I figured, if it was C.J. I was dead, but if it was anyone else, I should be honest. "I need a phone," I said. "I've been kidnapped."

The man walked closer to me. He was in uniform. He had a nightstick and a communicator, but I didn't see a gun.

"Kidnapped?"

"Yeah. My friend is still kidnapped. He'll kill her if I don't save her." I might have sounded a little spacey because of the Blue Death.

"It looks like you're breaking and entering. Isn't that really what's going on?"

"I don't care if you believe me. Arrest me. I want to be arrested."

He said nothing.

"You're not a real cop."

Another car pulled into the driveway. A man climbed out. He had a baseball cap pulled down low over his face, but I knew who it was.

"There you are," Arturo said.

"Don't let him near me!"

"I'm sorry, sir. My niece has been abusing drugs," Arturo said.

"That's clear," said the security guard.

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"Her parents sent her to stay with me to keep her away from bad influences." Arturo spoke with a foreign accent — it was some sort of actor's trick. "She ran away. I'll take her back now."

"Don't let him take me!" I screamed.

"She's yours," the security guard said. "Don't let this happen again."

Arturo grabbed my wrist, and pulled me toward the Saab.

I screamed. I lunged at the security guard and tried to take his nightstick. I grabbed it, but he was stronger than me. He pushed me down to the ground. So I bit him.

"Crazy bitch," he said, pinning me down with his knee.

"I'm terribly sorry about this," Arturo said. "Deeply ashamed. I'll put her right to bed."

I struggled to get away, but I was overpowered. I started sobbing. The next thing I knew, I was in handcuffs. First duct tape and now this, I thought. Shackled twice in one night!

"I'm going to call this in." The guard pulled out his communicator. "This bitch belongs in an institution."

Under the circumstances, those were the sweetest words I could imagine.

Arturo touched me on the shoulder. "Don't worry, honey. I'm going to get you a lawyer." With that, he got in his car and peeled away.

I was booked for assaulting the security guard and attempting to get his weapon. They took my fingerprints. Thank God they don't use ink anymore. I was dirty enough after a night in the hills.

I gave a statement describing everything that happened. I didn't leave anything out, not even the stuff about Blue Death, because I wanted to be believed. I didn't care what my parents would say. I didn't care what happened to me. I only wanted them to get Arturo, and to save Gwen if that was still possible.

When my father arrived, he was furious at me, for what I did, and for talking to the police without a lawyer. In the morning, I was brought in for more interrogation, this time with a lawyer.

"I have some good news for you," the detective said. He was in his mid-thirties, blond and good-looking. "Your friend Gwen's all right. She's fine."

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I was so happy. I broke into tears.

"Is there anything in your earlier statement you'd like to amend?" he asked.

"No," I said, looking at Scheer, my lawyer. "Everything I said was the truth."

"Then we have a little problem."

"What sort of problem?" Scheer asked.

The cop flicked a blond curl off of his forehead. "Not only is her friend all right, she tells an entirely different story."

"What did she say?" I asked.

"Look, Denyssa, if you tell the truth now, you won't be prosecuted for perjury."

"Everything I said was true."

"I would like to speak with my client privately," Scheer said.

"Ignore him. What did Gwen say?"

"She says she spent the night with Arturo Jansen. She says he never left the house at any time during the night, and that you were there early, but left on your own."

"That's not true," I said. "You're lying. Gwen wouldn't have said that."

"We also have a statement by Arturo Jansen. His story jibes with hers. He says you were acting strange, and insisted on leaving around eleven P.M. on foot, despite his offer to drive you home or call a cab."

"He's totally lying."

"You admit you ingested diethylfedramine?"

"What's that?"

"What you referred to as Blue Death."

My lawyer cast me a cautionary glance. "I admit it," I said.

"It's the word of two people against one, and you're not a very reliable witness. We've also checked with Wells Cellular. They're not aware of any problem with their Telepathy service such as you describe."

"I can't believe this. It did happen. I swear."

"Can you give us your chips? We'll test them."

"I told you. Arturo stripped them off of me."

The detective stared at me with his cold blue eyes. "You're telling me that Arturo Jansen, your friend Gwen, and the phone company are all lying. Why don't you admit that you were freaked out of your apple and were trying to break into the Silva residence?"

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"What about the security guard? He saw Arturo."

"We showed the security guard a selection of photographs, including one of Mr. Jansen. He was unable to identify anyone."

They threatened to prosecute me for assault, breaking and entering, and lying under oath. Thanks to Scheer, I pled guilty only to a misdemeanor, for biting the security guard. I got off with probation and psychological counseling.

The counselor helped a lot, especially when *Hollywood Weekly* did a profile on Gwen and Arturo. They were now a romantic duo and Gwen was now a blonde. It made me sick. Asked about rumors of Arturo's involvement in Palma's death, Gwen responded that Arturo was gentle and kind and was devastated by the murder. "There are always people willing to make up a nasty story," Gwen said. I took a match to that issue and burned it.

I was in school, in English class, when my teacher received a message on his monitor. He told me to go immediately to the principal's office.

My mother was waiting there. "Sgt. Reese wants us to come down to the station. I called Scheer." The crow's feet by my mother's eyes become obvious when she's upset. "It's time you get a part-time job to help us pay these legal bills of yours."

Scheer met us at the station house. Sgt. Reese, the cop who handled my case, sat us down in a conference room. "You told us a pretty crazy story a while back about hearing voices in your head," Reese said.

I kept my mouth shut. There was no use arguing.

"You may be interested in this news item."

> Los Angeles — Wells Cellular Corporation has corrected a software flaw which affected a small number of subscribers to its Telepathy™ service. In some circumstances, packets sent to one subscriber were being duplicated and sent to another. The flaw, which occurred only with rare combinations of Telepathy™ numbers, has been corrected in the switching centers and will not require the recall of any chips released to the public.

I looked straight at my mother. "I told you I didn't make it up."

My mother straightened the hem of her skirt. "Mothers make mistakes too."

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Reese broke in. "It's not like we never believed you. Arturo Jansen has always been a suspect in Palma Horvath's murder." Reese ran his fingers through his curly blond hair. "But we never had anything we could bring to a judge without being laughed out of the courtroom. Are you willing to testify in court about what happened to you on the night of your kidnapping?"

"Yes, and about the night Palma was murdered too."

"If you'll stand by your statement, we can use it to get a warrant to search Mr. Jansen's residence. Are you willing?"

"Totally!" I said.

I had the satisfaction of learning not long afterward that the "dreamy guy," Arturo, had been arrested. The search netted fibers from his clothing that perfectly matched microscopic evidence found on Palma's body.

As everyone knows, he's now awaiting trial. It'll probably be broadcast in its entirety. I'm not supposed to watch because I'm a witness.

Two weeks later, Gwen the traitor called me up — on the telephone. "Do you want to take the call?" my mother asked.

"I don't want to speak to that bitch!"

"She says she wants to apologize. Why don't you talk to her?"

I took the phone. "Hello, Benedictine Arnold."

"I'm a jeremy. I admit it. I was totally wrong. I woke up in his bed that night, and I truly did not have any memory of being in the trunk. I was zoned. We made love, and it was fantastic. I asked where you were, and Arturo said you'd gone home."

"You believed him?"

"He said you went home because he liked me better and you were jealous. I'm sorry."

"So you lied for him?"

"He was everything I'd dreamed of. When the police called, and we went down to make a statement, he told me what to say. The way I figured it, he needed me. What better dump insurance could I have?"

"Weren't you afraid of him?"

"Look, I didn't think he killed Palma. I was wrong. Besides, even if he had done it, I knew he couldn't get away with killing two girlfriends in a row. And I really wanted to be with him. I am so sorry."

"What you say means nothing to me."

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"I'm testifying against him too," Gwen said. "They gave me immunity."

I felt immense relief. I'd dreaded taking the stand and having Arturo's lawyer cross-examine me, using Gwen's statement to make me into a liar.

"I'm really, totally sorry," Gwen said. "Can we be friends again?"

"No! What you did was rotten."

"I admit that. But what about the summer after seventh grade? Camp Coronado. You spent every moment with that boy from Phoenix. You totally ignored me. Then, when the fall came, you wanted to be friends again. I forgave you."

"What you did was worse."

"It was worse, but not all that different."

"It was three times as bad," I said.

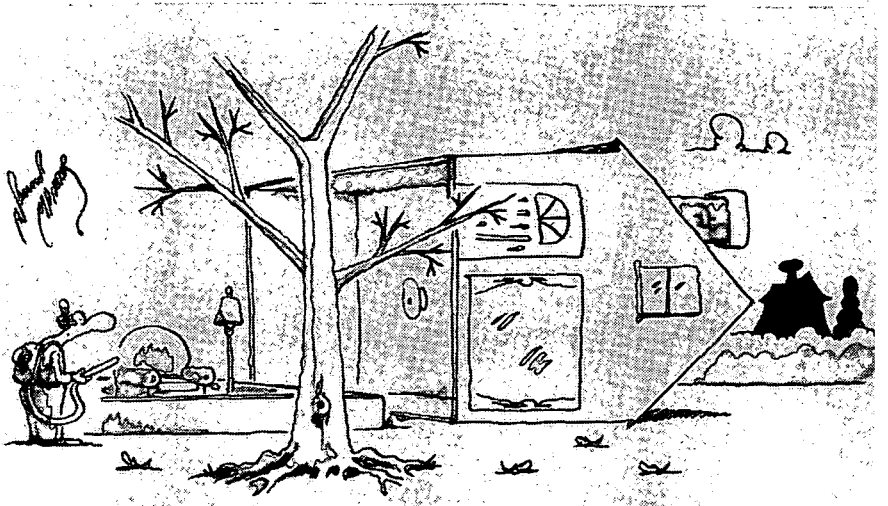
"Two times."

"All right. Two times."

"So can I come over?"

It was a good thing Gwen couldn't hear the names I called her in my head. Still, I find it hard to hold a grudge where Gwen is concerned. We go back all the way to first grade.

"Yeah," I said. "But you better bring something, and it better be chocolate. You are maximum going to make this up to me."



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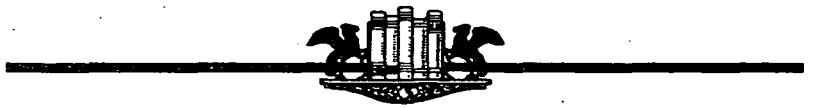

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Hearts in Atlantis, by Stephen King, Scribner, 1999, $28.

STEPHEN King's first novel for Scribner *(Bag of Bones)* was touted as his break-out book — the one that would put him on the literary map, a step or two removed from his genre roots (though as King himself has put it, he's a brand-name author; he's in his own genre).

I'd say that this is the novel that should do it, if any can.

Not that King needs to be taken seriously by the literary world. He already has millions of readers who care only that he promises and delivers a good story, with great characters and plots that keep them turning the pages as fast as they can read them. But for long-time fans it always seems unfair that he's not taken as seriously as he should be. Yes, he's entertaining. But when he's at the top of his form, as he certainly is here, he can be as provocative and inspired as <insert your favorite literary author here>.

Hearts in Atlantis is the Great American Baby Boomer novel. It focuses on the generation that came of age during the turbulent sixties, the days of hippiedom and the Vietnam War, exploring their roots as well as what became of them when the love beads and Purple Hearts were put away in boxes and the future arrived. There is a small fantastical element in the novel's connection to his Wastelands series that might prove a little perplexing to those unfamiliar with those books, but happily it doesn't play a major role and is soon swallowed by other, more pertinent matters.

The novel — and I insist on calling it that — unfolds in five stand-alone sections ranging in length from novella to short story. The reason I call it a novel is that while each piece does work on its own, reading them in order creates all the undertows and resonances

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that make the best novels so engaging. The protagonists change from story to story, but the characters reappear throughout, following disparate threads that, by the last story, prove to have been meant to be braided together from the very start.

I'm being more than vague in what the novel's actually about, but that's because I don't want to steal away one iota of the pleasure you'll find as you delve into these pages. Let me just say that I'm pleased, and I have to admit, even a little surprised, that an author such as King with so many books already under his belt, can still surpass himself the way he has here.

So if you've passed on King's work before because he's that horror writer and you don't read horror, do yourself a favor and give this book a try. It sings. It has heart. And it won't disappoint you for a moment.

Yes, he's written some gruesome horror novels and — I'll be the first to admit — some truly grotesque books. But he's also an author who has proven throughout his long career that he isn't afraid to take chances, to stand naked on the stage there in front of us and push his own boundaries. And it's because of this, because of all the times he *is* successful, that I have as much admiration for him as I do.

Opus, Volume One, by Barry Windsor-Smith, Fantagraphics Books, 1999, $39.95.

First a quick summary of Barry Windsor-Smith's career for those who might be unfamiliar with his art. Primarily known for his work in comic books, Windsor-Smith is the artist — along with Michael Kaluta, Bernie Wrightson, Charles Vess, and a handful of others — who brought the sensibilities of the Pre-Raphaelites and turn-of-the-century book illustrators to a field of art that, before the early seventies, was best known for ludicrously proportioned superheroes in tights, drawn in a simple, if energetic, fashion. (Sadly, in many cases, the field hasn't changed at all, except that the focus now seems to be on "bad girls" with big swords or big guns, still ludicrously proportioned, but exchanging the tights for leather and latex outfits.)

From his work on the early issues of *Conan the Barbarian*, where his art provided a shimmering, magical vision that the sometimes pedestrian plotlines didn't always deserve, to current projects, such as the recent "Storytellers" series and the hardback graphic novel *Adastra in Africa* (also available from Fantagraphics), Windsor-Smith's

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art has constantly pushed the boundaries of the field. And if some of his earlier work didn't have the narrative flow of, say, a Jack Kirby, each panel, taken by itself, was still a tiny masterpiece in its own right.

These days, he's mastered the storytelling flow from panel to panel without sacrificing any of the detail and complexity of the art itself.

Now to the book in hand.

I was a little surprised, once I began to read the text of what I thought was simply a new book focused on his art. Rather than the usual commentary/biographical material that would ordinarily accompany a monograph, I found, instead, the first installment of Windsor-Smith's autobiography. Sort of.

Let me explain. While the text is autobiographical, it details only a few weeks in the beginning of Windsor-Smith's career, focusing on a trio of extraordinary events that occurred to him while living in New York City: two precognitive, one visionary, all three described in great detail. Did these events actually occur? I don't think that's really the point. Windsor-Smith appears more interested in discussing the boundaries of perception than he is in convincing us as to whether or not the events actually happened, while his descriptions of them, and his additional commentaries, present the visual artist as a man who is also a skilled writer.

As a prose stylist he proves to be thoughtful and lyrical, yet also humorous and down-to-earth, and the text allows a glimpse into the fertile mind that has been creating such wonderful art for more than three decades now. One begins to understand where some of the imagery in his drawings and paintings originates from when the art is viewed through the prism of his life experience. Side trip observations on consensual reality and simplified discussions on some of the theories of modern physics only make the dialogue all the more fascinating.

But you're not interested in that sort of thing? You're only interested in his art? Well, *Opus, Volume One* fulfills the role of a traditional monograph at the same time, providing just as much of a visual feast for the eyes as the text does for the mind. Almost every page presents examples of gorgeous art — rendered in pencil, pen and ink, watercolors, and even oils. The production values are superb — although this observation comes from someone who can't compare the originals to what appears here on the page, so I can't vouch for how

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true the reproductions are. Still, considering Windsor-Smith's attention to detail as it comes out in the text, one assumes he was involved in all parts of the publication process, and that what we get here are approved versions.

Each piece of art — much of it previously published, but with a good sampling of sketchbook material and other rare items included — comes with a full commentary considering the art's inspiration, initial appearance, and odd little tidbits of information. They're both entertaining and informative, showing that, had he wished, Windsor-Smith could easily have gone the usual route for this sort of collection with great success. Personally, I'm glad he chose the more adventurous course.

All in all, *Opus, Volume One* is a wonderful glimpse into the mind and art of one of the field's more talented individuals. And best of all, from that "Volume One" in its title, we can only assume that there are further installments still to come.

The Fairies, by Suza Scalora, Joanna Cotler Books/HarperCollins, 1999, $19.95.

Readers of this column might already be aware of photographer Suza Scalora's work, if only inadvertently, since her photographs have adorned the covers of the last few books by Francesca Lia Block (reviewed in previous column installments). In fact, the cover of *I Was a Teenage Fairy* is reproduced here in a much more vibrant print than was used on the dustjacket.

How you'll react to the text of the book depends on your temperament. Much like the Brian Froud/Terry Jones collaboration, *Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Book*, Scarola's *The Fairies* purports to be a quest to investigate the denizens of faerie, though Scarola doesn't squish them between a book's pages the way Lady Cottington did. Instead, we're given these clever, and often quite evocative, photographs with their accompanying text of what sort of fairy it depicts, a bit of its history, and where and how Scarola managed to take the picture.

It's all quite harmless fun, really. And even if the text leaves you cold, the photographs are quite stunning.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Darwin's Radio, by Greg Bear, Del Rey, 1999, $24.

Waiting, by Frank M. Robinson, Forge, 1999, $23.95.

The Silk Code, by Paul Levinson, Tor, 1999, $23.95.

FOR A species — or sub-species, or breed, or however they should really be categorized — that apparently does not represent a direct ancestor of our own, the Neanderthals have proven surprisingly newsworthy over the years. New studies get a front-page slot in *The New York Times*. Half a dozen more-or-less successful thrillers in recent years have revisited the notion of a Neanderthal survivor cropping up in the present day. The very term serves colloquially as a synonym for "caveman." You might have a hard time finding someone on the bus with you who would recognize a reference to *Homo habilis* or *Paranthropus*, but everyone's heard of Neanderthals.

What's the fascination? Perhaps it's the near-miss quality, the notion of a branch of the Homo family so like us but not, it seems, directly preceding or "leading up" to us, an evolutionary what-might-have-been that violates our expectation of neat progression in the human family tree. Or maybe it's the nearness in time — the Neanderthals faded from history only 30,000 years ago, practically yesterday compared to the millions of years that yawn between us and the australopithecine Lucy. Or maybe — one hopes this isn't it, but maybe it's the fact that Neanderthals are the only variety of hominid found primarily in Europe and the Middle East rather than Africa or Asia. I wonder if Neanderthals are as interesting to the Chinese?

Whatever it is that makes Neanderthals so compelling, it's at least as strong — maybe stronger —

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in sf circles. Speculations about humanity's distant past have been a part of sf since the beginning, and Neanderthals have intrigued sf writers from Isaac Asimov ("The Ugly Little Boy") and L. Sprague de Camp ("The Gnarly Man") to Dave Wolverton, Robert J. Sawyer, and dozens of others. Given the many recent discoveries and reopened debates about our Neanderthal cousins, it's hardly surprising that some of the most interesting Neanderthal sf — dare we coin such a term? — appeared in 1999.

Greg Bear's latest novel, *Darwin's Radio*, may be the best sf novel involving Neanderthals ever written. It certainly features the most intriguing and thought-provoking interpretation of the place of Neanderthals in human history. I don't think it's giving away too much to reveal that, in Bear's book, Neanderthals turn out to be our direct ancestors after all.

It begins with an incredible find: the frozen remains of two Neanderthals in a cave high in the Alps. The discovery is all the more amazing — and perplexing — because along with the two Neanderthals (a man and a woman) is an infant who, in every way, appears to be a modern human. Mitch Rafelson, the anthropologist who makes the discovery, sees in this bizarre juxtaposition the explanation for the whole confusing fossil record of Neanderthals. Modern humans, he believes, derive directly from Neanderthals through a process of rapid speciation (that is, the appearance of a new, separate species out of a preexisting one). Neanderthal mothers, he suggests, gave birth to fully modern human babies — one species producing another in a single swoop of genetic transformation.

This is, of course, evolutionary heresy, and the scientific establishment works hard to suppress news of the find. Rafelson's already-ruined reputation — the result of a dispute over ownership of some Native American remains — makes his revolutionary interpretation easy to dismiss.

Meanwhile, a mysterious virus begins to afflict pregnant women, forcing miscarriages, and the disease spreads rapidly while scientists race to understand it and work some sort of cure. No one but Rafelson and two scientists on the virus team see the connection — that this new "disease" is the beginning of another break in human evolution, the instantaneous appearance of a new species of human that will take the place of ours.

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It's a great premise for a thriller, and Bear handles his plot and the complex ideas at its heart with all his usual skill. *Darwin's Radio* is far superior to other recent thrillers on similar themes, such as John Darnton's *Neanderthal*, Mark Canter's *Ember from the Sun*, and Philip Kerr's *Esau*, not only because Bear creates fuller, more realistic characters and situations, but also because Bear understands the science behind his ideas more deeply. The implications of dozens of recent discoveries in molecular biology, DNA studies, anthropology, and epidemiology all contribute to the ideas that drive *Darwin's Radio*, and these roots in the details of current research (not simply the headlines) make Bear's premise more than the engine of a plot. It's rare to find any sf novel that might legitimately claim to offer a glimpse of a real future, but *Darwin's Radio* does just that, if only in foretelling a revolution in our understanding of evolutionary biology. As Bear notes in his afterword, many of the details of his scenario will likely turn out to be wrong, but our current views on the workings of evolution will almost certainly "undergo a major upheaval — not in the next few decades, but in the next few *years*." The possibility that the new framework may be something like that put forward by Bear gives the novel a special edge. You'll learn a lot of real science from *Darwin's Radio*, and it won't hurt a bit.

But what makes *Darwin's Radio* such a joy is how it succeeds on so many different levels. It's got a foundation of speculative science as complicated and ingenious as any recent sf novel; it's got characters of rare believability that keep the story grounded on a human scale despite its vast conceptual implications; it offers an unusually clear picture of how social and political factors influence the workings of scientific research; and it becomes a moving story of personal hope and struggle against fear and prejudice. How often does any novel yield so much?

In this sense, *Darwin's Radio* represents the fulfillment of the promise Bear showed in his award-winning *Blood Music*. That novel has been praised for its unusually deft blend of complex hard science concepts and even more complex characters. *Darwin's Radio* carries that combination to splendid new heights, and like *Blood Music* it does so outside the more familiar territories of large-scale cosmology and high-energy physics. For years the biological sciences have been

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heralded as a wellspring of new hard sf material, but few writers have managed to handle the concepts at any significant depth. With *Darwin's Radio*, Greg Bear shows exactly how it's done. He sets the high-water mark for biological hard sf. We can only hope other writers will follow.

Frank M. Robinson's *Waiting* takes a very different path, though it arrives at a similar conclusion. Not about the relationship between Neanderthals and modern humans — Robinson takes the traditional route there, imagining modern humans slowly exterminating Neanderthals way back when—but about the eventual replacement of our species by another.

In *Waiting*, that species isn't a brand-new one that emerges from our own, but it's the Neanderthals themselves, or their descendants, who have been living among us for 30,000 years, hoping that our murderous species will exterminate itself and make room for them again. (There are suggestions that the other species isn't Neanderthal either, but the characteristics Robinson gives them resemble Neanderthals more than a little, so it seems as well to treat them as essentially the same.) Like Bear's novel, Robinson's takes the form of a thriller, and begins with a discovery that could overturn conventional scientific theories. In this case it's not bodies of the long-dead, but the body of the victim of an automobile accident. A doctor who gets a look at the corpse realizes that it's not the body of a normal human being — it's so different that he's convinced the victim wasn't even a member of the same species — and he's going to write up his findings for a professional journal. The *Waiting*-among-us are on the verge of discovery, and at least some of them will stop at nothing to keep the secret from getting out.

Though Robinson goes along for the most part with the standard version of the fate of the Neanderthals — except for the hidden survivors — he does add a twist of his own that helps explain one of the lingering questions anthropologists have yet to settle. Based on the available evidence, which is scanty, it seems that Neanderthals didn't have as fully formed larynxes as modern humans. Could they talk? If so, they likely weren't as good at it as modern humans. Robinson's survivors rely on a kind of telepathy instead, and it gives them a very effective power of suggestion over members of our species. When they

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remove anyone who might know about them (the doctor is the first to go), they do it indirectly — putting the idea of suicide into one's mind, leading a random homeless man to homicidal rage, using whatever (or whoever) is handy, and thereby leaving no clues to themselves.

Though the scientific foundations aren't nearly so convincing as in *Darwin's Radio*, it's still a solid concept for a thriller, and Robinson is an old hand at the form *(The Power, The Glass Inferno)*. He moves the story along smoothly, as Arthur Banks — newswriter for a local San Francisco TV station, friend of the doctor whose suspicions began the whole thing — seeks answers to his friend's death and the deaths of others all around him. Soon it's got a kind of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* feel, as Banks learns that he can't trust anyone — that even his best friends could be members of this patient old species, waiting for an opportunity to do away with him in some convenient fashion.

Waiting holds the interest, but it's disappointingly uneven. As events heat up, Banks's actions don't always make much sense, and as we learn more about our successors-in-waiting, their behavior too begins to seem less than rational — and even less than possible. At one point Banks is, unbeknownst to him, speaking with one of these secret people while watching skaters at a rink, and as they talk the other uses his power of suggestion to make an old man perform incredible athletic feats on the ice, until the effort kills him. Looking back after we learn more about how this power works, it seems impossible — members of this other species can plant suggestion, but how could they get an old body to do things it's not physically capable of doing? Such inconsistencies, mounting as the book progresses, spoil some of the intensity that *Waiting* might otherwise have had.

Paul Levinson's novel, *The Silk Code*, offers something of a combination of Bear's and Robinson's books. Levinson posits the secret survival of Neanderthals alongside modern humans, and conspiracies to keep that secret safe (as does Robinson in *Waiting)*, but he also uses recent research in genetics and biology to offer an explanation of the relationship between modern humans and Neanderthals that's like Bear's in many ways. And he packages it all, like Bear and Robinson, in a thriller-style plot.

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Levinson begins with a reworked version of a story he published in *Analog*, "The Mendelian Lamp Case," which relates forensic detective Philip D'Amato's trip to Amish country and his encounters there with a hidden tradition of practical biotechnology used by the Amish, and by a shadowy group of unspecified baddies who have been wielding it against the rest of humanity for millennia. In *The Silk Code* this forms a kind of prologue (though a long one) to the larger story. Levinson then takes us back to the eighth century for a look at an earlier phase of this ongoing struggle, and we get a sense of just how old the battle is. The "singers" — Neanderthals, who communicate in rich songstreams rather than words — have been hunted relentlessly over the millennia by modern humans, and by the eighth century they live only in isolated pockets, one of which lies in the Pyrenees. Their bodies are sometimes also found in the dry sands along the Silk Road, mummified, and ancient tradition warns of a disease the bodies may carry. Silk, it seems, can afford a kind of

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protection against this contagion, and thus the material is highly prized, and the secret of its production carefully guarded by the Chinese.

Then it's back to the present, where Phil D'Amato gets called in on a case in which the mummified body of what appears to be a Neanderthal is found in a rest room at the NYU library. Mysterious enough, but even more so since it would appear that this body is actually that of a janitor who worked at the library — but the body now not only looks ancient, it actually carbon-dates to about 30,000 years old. When similar corpses pop up in London and Toronto, and the specialists on those cases begin turning up dead, D'Amato finds himself in the middle of a deadly mystery not unlike the one in *Waiting*.

The Silk Code is Levinson's first novel, and it shows. He has thought up a fascinating concept that pulls together a wide and varied array of ideas and recent discoveries — from Neanderthal DNA and the habits of moths to the mysterious Causcasian mummies that have been found in Central Asia — but he's not quite skillful enough as a novelist yet to bring it off. The opening section, adapted from the *Analog* story, isn't integrated well enough with the rest of the tale, and the interlude in the eighth century, while engaging, goes on much longer than it should given the little that it contributes to the plot. Meanwhile, other scenes that could have borne more thorough treatment blink past so quickly it's hard to weigh their importance, and still other events happen offstage that would be better seen firsthand.

Nevertheless, what Levinson lacks in novelist's skills he makes up for with sheer conceptual verve. The ideas are interesting enough to make *The Silk Code* a rewarding book despite its flaws. We can hope that as Levinson gains experience and expertise as a writer, he'll lose none of his knack for provocative ideas, and he'll offer us books with pleasures of both kinds in the future.

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Tanith Lee's most recent books include Saint Fire: The Secret Books of Venus *and* Biting the Sun. *Her last story here was "All the Birds of Hell" in our October 1998 issue. This new one is a chilling piece that's apt to stay with you.*

The Eye in the Heart

By Tanith Lee
From an idea by John Kaiine

THE LAST PLACE I SAW WAS Venice. He said he wanted it to be somewhere special — and it was. The memories are so perfect, and whenever I want, I can take them out of the cupboards of my mind and look at them. The malachite green canals, the greenish blue of the Italian skies, the gleaming domes, the white pigeons. And my husband, standing brown and smiling, his eyes full of pride in me, and love — and, yes, sexual love as well. How thoughtful he was. They were a magical two weeks.

Our holiday was marred only by one brief episode. I don't know why I think of it, but sometimes I do. To belong to our Sect of course sets us apart. All persons of deep convictions experience these odd occasional slights. One mustn't dwell on them or feel bitterness, because bitterness does no one any good.

But there. She was a young woman in a white dress, tanned, and apparently happy, as we were. Impulsively I went up to her, and asked if she would take a photo of us, my husband and I. I could imagine him, in the future, looking at it fondly, remembering our delight and oneness. But

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the girl edged away a little. Firmly she said "No." And then, blushing and frowning, to cover her bluntness, "I'm no good with cameras. Excuse me." Then she hurried off.

My husband, seeing I was slightly upset, at once found a man, who was much more amenable, and took the shot of us, which I've seen. It's a nice photograph. Perhaps the girl was only truthful and didn't want to let us down. Yet...I think she had realized we were people of a sect, our particular Sect, and our beliefs offended her. And somehow, now, I sometimes see her face, with my mind's eye, its blush, its frown, the sort of — terror — in it. So, using my special computer, I'm trying to explain.

THERE WAS ONE other thing about Venice, and other places we went through. I did feel so sorry for the older women, the married ones. I noticed especially, their eyes were so dull and heavy and troubled. But I haven't been much outside our Town, and so I'm used to our own married women, whose eyes are always clear and sparkling.

When I was a child, a lot of girls, including me, used to pretend to be married. My mother sometimes told me off for using so many of her scarves, and losing them in the woods. That was before we started Domestic Classes. Then, of course we had to practice properly. There were a few accidents, the worst one when a girl fell down the school steps and broke her ankle. Otherwise we laughed so much. But soon you get very proficient. I was, well, I'm boasting but it's a fact, one of the best. And it's stood me in good stead. Later, once they've allocated your house in Town, for a month before you marry, you have individual training. My husband told me I was an absolute star, but then I showed off to him. I demonstrated what I could do. We sneaked in the house alone, when we weren't supposed to, you see. I think quite a few people guessed, actually. His smile didn't help, it was so broad afterward you could count all his white teeth!

The only thing I never had quite right was the cooker — I'm still working on that, but the splash-screen gets pretty dirty. Just so you know, I'm not saying I'm faultless at anything — heaven forbid.

Some people, I've heard, sometimes ask why. I mean, why we do this.

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It's so obvious that it's quite hard to explain. It's that thing about bitterness again. Bitterness, and being hurt — worrying over what you can't do anything about — and then hurting others, *worrying* others, making a mess. And then — you're left with nothing.

We marry for life. Marriage is sacred. And everyone wants to be happy.

My mother had the bluest eyes. I used to stare and stare at them, so clear and darting as she spoke to me. Aquamarines. I can still see them, though she died last year. It was a sad time. Dad may marry again, though. He's still strong and young-sounding. I take flowers to her grave, and once I tripped, and this young girl, about twelve, ran over and helped me up. I could almost hear Mom laughing. *And you such a star!* She was sweet, my mother, but she was very down-to-earth, too.

I can recall quite well what she said to me, when I was about five, and she explained. So maybe I should just use her explanation, instead of trying to find the words myself.

"Women are so sensitive, darling. They have to be. They have to be aware what a man wants, what their children want. They have antennae all over them, *whiskers* of *feeling*. And unfortunately that has a down side. It means they get hurt so easily. And then they doubt. And soon they just can't believe. She'll say to her husband, 'You don't love me anymore. I can see it in your face.' Maybe he's just tired — or maybe his love is tired. But she'll read something so awful into it. And then she'll nag and rave on, and drive him crazy. And in the end he won't be able to stand it. He'll slap her — or worse, he'll leave her. And what good will that do her? And men, you see, honey, sometimes they do little things...little things it's better for a wife not to know. It's much nicer if she needn't worry about if she can forgive him. Do you remember that silly song, "Lipstick on your Collar"? Well, the women here in Town don't ever have to bother about that. Most of all, the thing they always see, with the eye of the heart, is how he looked at them last. All that wanting and care, that love. And when he tells you he loves you, why, he does. Oh darling, we're so lucky."

When we came back from Venice, I went straight into our hospital. I had the loveliest doctor. He was the kindest man. He assured me, there isn't a single scar, and he let me feel, so I know. "You're pretty as a picture," he said. He even flirted, and I must have looked nothing at all

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after the op. "Your eyes are green as grapes, Missy. I could look and look at those green eyes. I could eat them up."

My husband bought them for me. Dad would have, but he just insisted. They are truly beautiful, I cried out when I saw them, in their velvet box. We displayed them with the wedding presents. I'm sorry to say I think there was a bit of jealousy here and there. Well, I'm sorry to say I enjoyed it, too.

And now we live so happily — all but for the cooker! Never mind. I've got years and years to master that.

In my mind, I can see my husband as clear as a painting, and the love and wanting in his face. And when he kisses me, that's what I see, that's what I'll always see.

Oh, I know there are people out there, deluded people who perhaps even mean well, who try and try to get us stopped, or hounded out of the state, but if only I could tell them how wrong they are. Though I'm blind now, *because* I'm blind, like every married woman in Town, I know I need never be afraid.

It was my twenty-first birthday last week, and my husband was a little bit late — only an hour or so. And I might well have started to worry, searching his face, trying to trap him in some lie.... But no, he wasn't lying about all that at the office. I only have to remember his face, the way he looked in Venice. And I take his hand, and his lips are warm.

After all, as my mother said, "What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over."

And I've some wonderful news to give him when he gets back tonight. I'll wait up, even until three or four in the morning. I'm *pregnant*.

I wonder if it will be a girl?

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Since he retired from his government job a few years ago, Mr. Cowdrey has graced us with delicious dark fantasies like "The Great Ancestor" and "White Magic." Now he brings us something very different—a futuristic tale of political intrigue of a sort we haven't seen here in a while.

Crux

By Albert E. Cowdrey

DEVA WATCHED THE EARTH revolve beneath her, vanish into banks of icy cirrus, then emerge as a patchwork of blue sea and immobile, shining cumuli.

Bits of continents poked through the gaps as the airpacket swung out on a hyperbolic curve. She had a glimpse of North America, with the Appalachian Islands trailing into the Atlantic and the Inland Sea glimmering under the hot March sun. Then the sixty-one passengers were shrouded in the lower cloud layer and reading lights winked briefly on before they emerged again to flit like the shadow of a storm over the broad Pacific.

A light meal was served, and during dessert the glint of Fujiyama Island on the right with its attendant green islets announced that they were nearing the Worldcity. They flashed into the dark red sun and the vast forest of China leaped out of the glittering wavelets of the Yellow Sea. Fifty-five hundred clicks was now too fast and one, two, three times the airpacket quivered as the retros slowed it to a sedate thousand.

They were speeding over the green savannahs of the Gobi, famous for its herds of wild animals. Of course they were too high and moving too fast

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to see the herds, but a mashina in the forward wall of the cabin darkened, glittered briefly with pinpoints of light, and filled with solid-seeming images of wapiti, elephants, haknim, sfosura — animals native and imported from other worlds — shambling over pool-dotted green plains where the immortal Khan once ruled.

Dyeva's pale, high-cheekboned face concentrated and her unblinking dark eyes glinted with reflected images. Nine-tenths of the Earth — humanity's first home — was now a world of beasts. The ultimate achievement of the man called Minister Destruction. Was it for this that twelve billion people had died?

In the sunset glow of Ulanor the Worldcity, Stef sprawled on his balcony wearing a spotty robe and listening to the cries of vendors and the creak of wheels in Golden Horde Street. He loved to loll here smoking kif in the last light during all seasons except the brief, nasty Siberian winter.

A commotion in the street made him swing his bony legs off the battered lounge chair. He tucked the mouthpiece of his pipe into a loop of hose from the censer and shuffled in broken-strap sandals to the railing.

Down below, vendors' carts had pulled against the walls and a long line of prisoners (blue pajamas, short hair, wrists and necks imprisoned in black plastic kangs) shuffled past like a column of ants. Guards in wide-brimmed duroplast helmets strode along the line at intervals, swinging short whips against the legs of laggards to hurry them on. The prisoners groaned and somebody started to sing a prison song in Alspeke, the only language that all humans knew: *Smerta, smerta mi kallá/Ya nur trubna haf syegdá...*

Death, death, call me, I have nothing but trouble always. Picking up the rhythm, even the laggards began moving so quickly that the guards no longer had an excuse to strike.

A good song, thought Stef, lying down again, because it goes in two opposite directions, endurance and despair. Those are the poles of life, right? Of his life, anyway. Except for kif, which was close to being his religion, filling him during these evening hours with a distant cool melancholy, with what the Old Believers called Holy Indifference — meaning that what happened happened and you didn't try to fuck with God. And, of course, there was Dzhun. She meant a little more than lust,

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a good deal less than love. He whispered her name, which meant summertime in Alspeke, with its original English intonation and meaning: June.

Then frowned. He was, as usual, out of cash. Kif cost money. Then how was he supposed to afford Dzhun? He brooded, puffing slowly, letting the aromatic smoke leak from his nose and mouth. He needed a case. He needed a job. He needed money to fall on him out of the sky.

Even blasé passengers who had seen Ulanor many times, perhaps even had grown up there, joined the newcomers in staring through the ports at the capital of the human race.

More than a million people! Dyeva thought. Who could believe a city so vast? Of course, compared to the world-cities of the 21st century, Ulanor was hardly a suburb. But this could at least give her a glimmering of the wonders that had been lost — a revelation of the once (and future?) world before the Time of Troubles had changed everything.

The shuttle was drifting along now, joining the traffic at the fifth level on the outermost ring, swinging around so that the city with its spoked avenues and glittering squares seemed to be turning. The copilot (a black box, of course) began speaking in a firm atonal voice, pointing out such wonders as Genghis Khan Allee, Yellow Emperor Place where the various sector controllers had their palaces, and Government of the Universe Place, where the President's Palace faced the Senate of the Worlds.

"And then the Clouds and Rain District," said a man's voice, and the native Earthlings all broke into guffaws.

The black box paused politely while the disturbance quieted, then resumed its spiel. Dyeva had turned a delicate pink. The brothel district (named for a poetic Chinese description of intercourse, the "play of clouds and rain") had been denounced in Old Believer churches ever since she could remember. And while she no longer was a believer herself, she retained a lively sense of the degradation endured by the women and men (and even children) who worked there.

She reflected that such exploitation formed the dark reverse of the civilization she loved and hoped to restore. Perhaps after all there was something to be said for the near-empty Earth of today. Then, impatiently, Dyeva shook the thought out of her head. This was no time for doubt. Not now. Not *now*.

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* * *

Stef was still frowning, with the mouthpiece between his lips, when his mashina chimed inside the apartment. Irritated because somebody was calling during his relaxing hour, he padded inside, evading the shadows of junk furniture, stepping over piles of unwashed clothing. He told the mashina, "Say," and it flickered into life. Inside the box hovered the glowing head of Colonel Yamashita of the Security Forces.

"*Hai, Korul Yama.*"

"I need something private done. Come see me now, Gate 43."

No waste words there. The image expired into a glowing dot. Sighing, Stef dropped his robe among the other castoffs on the floor and plowed into a musty closet, looking for something clean.

On the roof of the old building a hovercab with the usual black box for a driver nosed up when Stef pushed a call button. He climbed in and gave orders for the Lion House, Gate 43.

"*Gratizor,*" said the black box. Thank you, sir. Why were black boxes always more polite than people?

As they zipped down Genghis Khan Allee, Stef viewed the flood-lit facades of Government of the Universe Place without much interest. He had long ago realized that they were a stage set and that all the action was behind the scenes. Bronze statues honored the Yellow Emperor, Augustus Caesar, Jesus, Buddha, Alexander the Great, and of course the ubiquitous Genghis Khan. All of them Great Unifiers of Humankind. Forerunners of the Worldcity and its denizens.

Genghis even had a pompous tomb set amid the floodlights—not that his bones were in it; nobody had ever found them. But yokels from the offworlds visited Ulanor specifically to gaze upon the grave of this greatest (and bloodiest) Unifier of them all.

Near the tomb foreshortened vendors were selling roasted nuts, noodles wrapped in paper, tiny bundles of kif, seaweed, bowls of miso and kimshi, and babaku chicken with texasauce. The scene was orderly; people strolled and ate at all hours and never feared crime. Breaking the law led to the Palace of Justice off Government of the Universe Place and the warren of tiled cells beneath that were called collectively the White Chamber. The formidable Kathmann, head of Earth Security, ruled the White Chamber, and his reputation alone was enough to keep Ulanor law-abiding.

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The cab turned off the main drag, zipped down back alleys at a level twenty meters above the street, and drew up at a deep niche in a blank white slab of a building. Stef flashed his ID at the black box and a flicker of light acknowledged payment. He stepped into the foyer and a bored guard in a kiosk looked up.

"Hai?"

"Hai. Ya Steffens Aleksandr. Korul Yamashita ha'kallá."

His voice activated a monitor. The guard stared at the resulting picture, then searched Stef's face as if another, unauthorized face might be concealed beneath it. Finally he spoke to the security system, which silently opened a bronze-plated steel door.

In the public areas of the Lion House multicolored marble and crimson carved *shishi* were everywhere, but here where the action was the hallways were blank, slapped together out of semiplast and floored with dusty gray mats. Light panels glowed in the ceiling; doors were blank, to confuse intruders. Stef, who knew the corridor well, counted nineteen doors and knocked.

He gasped as a stench that would have done honor to a real lion house hit him in the face. The door had been opened by a Darksider, and its furry mandrill face gazed at him with black cat pupils set in huge round eyes the color of ripe raspberries. The creature had two big arms and two little ones; one big arm held the door, one rested on its gunbelt, and the two little ones scratched the thick fur on its chest.

"Korul Yamashita mi zhdat," Stef managed to say without choking. Colonel Yama awaits me. The Darksider moved aside and he made his way through the dim guardroom followed by an unblinking red/ black stare. He knocked again, and at last entered Yamashita's office.

"Hai," said Stef, but Yama wasted no time.

"Stef, I got a problem," he began. Everything in the office was made of black or white duroplast, as if to withstand an earthquake or a revolution. Stef slipped into a black chair that apparently had been consciously shaped to cause discomfort.

"Why the animal outside? Can't you afford a human guard?" asked Stef, looking around for a kif pipe and seeing none.

"Everybody important has a Darksider now. More reliable, even if they do stink. Now listen. This information is absolutely a beheader, so

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I hope your neck tingles if you ever feel an urge to divulge it. For months I been getting vague reports from the Lion Sector about terrorists who are interested in time travel. Now something's happened here on Earth. Somebody's pirated a wormholer from the University."

"Oh, shit." Since Stef hadn't even known that a real wormholer existed, his surprise was genuine.

"The people who were responsible for the machine are now with Kathmann in the White Chamber and I assure you that if it was an inside job the Security Forces will soon know."

"I bet they will."

"I don't have to spell out for you the danger if some *glupetz* gets at the past. Ever since the technology came along, assholes have been wanting to go back and change this, change that. They don't understand the chaotic effect of such changes. They don't see how things can spin out of control."

Yamashita sat brooding, a man who had devoted his life to control.

"They think they can manage the time process. They don't see how some little thing, some insignificant thing, can send history spinning off in some direction they haven't foreseen, nobody's foreseen."

Stef nodded. He was thinking about someone monkeying with the past, suddenly causing himself, or Dzhun, or the genius who had synthesized kif to wink out of existence. It was hard to maintain Holy Indifference in the face of possibilities like that.

"What can I do?"

But Yama hadn't finished complaining.

"Why don't these *svini* do something useful?" he fretted. *Svini* meant swine. "Why don't they try to change the future instead of the past, try to make it better?"

"Possibly because you'd execute them if they did."

Suddenly Yama grinned. He and Stef went back a long way; the academy, service on Io, on Luna. They had been rivals once but no longer. Yama headed the Security Service at the Lion House, a fat job; the Lion Sector which it administered was a huge volume of space with hundreds of inhabited worlds stretching up the spiral arm toward the dense stars of the galactic center.

Meanwhile Stef was out on his ass, picking up small assignments to solve problems Yama didn't want to go public with. Like the present one:

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Yama had no authority on Earth, but suspected a connection between a local happening and one in Far Space. As an agent, Stef had two great advantages — he was reliable and deniable.

"It's true," Yama went on, "I like things as they are. Humanity's been through a lot of crap to get where it is. We need to conserve what we've got."

"Absolutely."

Yama looked suspiciously at Stef's bland face. He didn't like Stef to say things that might be either sincere or ironic, or might wag like a dog's tail, back and forth.

Stef grinned just a little. "Yama, I really do agree with you. Against all logic I'm happy, and happy people don't want change. Now, how can I find this wormholer thief?"

Yama was instantly all business again. "I'll tell you everything you need to know," he said.

"And not a bit more."

"Absolutely," said Yama, who really did have a sense of humor, colonel of security or not. He began by transferring 100 khans to Stef's meager bank account, knowing that Stef would promptly spend it and need more, and his need would keep him working.

AS YAMA TALKED, across the city in his big, heavily mortgaged house Professor Yang Li-Qutsai was in his study, lecturing to his mashina under staring vaporlamps.

His famous course at the University of the Universe, *Origa Nash Mir* (Origin of Our World), drew a thousand students every time he gave it. The reason was not profound scholarship — Yang plagiarized almost everything he said — but his brilliance as a speaker. At times he seemed to be a failed actor rather than a successful academic. His image included a long gray beard, a large polished skull, a frightening array of fingernails, and a deep, sonorous voice that made everything he said seem important, whether it was or not. A memory cube recorded his lecture for resale to the off-worlds where dismal little academies under strange suns would thrill to the echoes of his wisdom.

Even as he spoke, lucidly, stabbing the air with a long thin index finger

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that ended in nine centimeters of nail, Yang was calculating what resale and residual rights on the lecture might bring him. Enough to purchase a villa at the fashionable south end of Lake Bai? Peace at home, among his four wives? At least an expensive whore?

On the whole, he thought, I'd better settle for the whore. Half of his two-track mind dreamed of girls even while the other half was retelling the most calamitous event in the brief, horrid history of civilized man. The first lecture of his course was always on the Time of Troubles.

"Considering that the Troubles created our world," he declared, "it is shocking — yes, shocking — that we know so little about how the disaster began. In two brief years (2091-2093) twelve billion people died, with all their memories. Seven hundred vast cities were obliterated, with all their records; three hundred-odd governments vanished, with all their archives of hardcopy, records, discs, tapes and the first crude memory cubes. No wonder we know so little!

"Where and why did the fighting start? The Nine Plagues — when did they break out? Blue Nile hemorrhagic fever and multiple-drug-resistant blackpox were raging in Africa as early as the 2070s. Annual worldwide outbreaks of lethal influenza had become the rule by 2080. It seems that the Time of Troubles was well under way even before the outbreak of war."

Introductions were always troublesome: students, realizing they were in for a long hour, began to sink into a trancelike state accompanied by fluttering eyelids and restless movements of the pelvis. A warning light on the box glowed green and Yang headed at once into the horror stories that gave the course much of its appeal.

"But the war of 2091 produced the most spectacular effects: the destruction of the cities, the Two Year Winter, and the Great Famine. Let us take as an example the great city of Moscow, where robot excavators have recently given us an in-depth picture — if I may be pardoned a little joke — of the horrors that attended its destruction. A city of thirty million in 2090..."

Detail after horrendous detail followed: the skeleton-choked subway with its still beautiful mosaics recording the reign of Tsar Stalin the Good; the dry trench of the Moskva River whose waters had been vaporized in one glowing instant and blocked by rubble so that the present river flowed

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fifteen clicks away; the great Kremlin Shield of fused silicon stretching over the onetime city center, with its radioactive core that would glow faintly for at least 50,000 years.

Observing with satisfaction that his indicator light was turning from unlucky green to lucky red, Professor Yang moved on to the horrors of London, Paris, Tokyo, Beijing, and New York. Then he spoke briefly about the closed zones that still surrounded the lost cities, of irradiated wildlife undergoing rapid evolutionary change in bizarre and clamorous Edens where the capitals of great empires had stood, only three hundred years ago...

The interest indicator glowed like a Darksider's eye. Professor Yang strode up and down, his voice deepening, his gray beard swishing in the wind, his long fingers clawing at the air.

"Precisely how did it happen — this great calamity?" he demanded. "How much we know, and how little! Will it remain for the scholars of your generation to solve these riddles finally? I confess that mine has shed only a little light around the edges of the forbidding darkness that we call — the Time of Troubles!"

As usual, his lecture lasted exactly the time allotted, a one-hundred-minute hour. As usual, it ended with a key phrase, reminding the drowsy student of what he had been hearing at the rim of his clouded consciousness.

The power light in the mashina winked off, and Professor Yang shouted: "Tea!"

A door flew open and a scurrying domestic wheeled in the tea caddy, the cup, the *molko*, the tins of oolong and Earl Grey.

"Sometimes," muttered Yang, "I think I'll die of boredom if I ever have to talk about the Troubles again."

"One lump or two?" asked the domestic, and Yang, who drank tea after the ancient English fashion, turned anxious attention to the small, ridiculously expensive lumps of natural brown sugar.

"Two, I think," he said.

If residuals from the lecture didn't buy him a girl, at least they would, he hoped, keep him supplied with sugar for some time to come.

The clocks of the Worldcity were nearing 21 when Yamashita, dining comfortably at home with his wife Hariko, heard his security-coded

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mashina chime and hastened into his den to receive a secret report from Earth Security. Somebody had cracked under interrogation. Yama listened to the report with growing dismay.

"Shit, piss, and corruption," he growled. "Secretary!"

"Sir?" murmured the box in a soft atonal voice.

"Contact Steffens Aleksandr. If he's not at home — and of course he won't be — start calling the houses in the Clouds and Rain District. Make it absolutely clear that this is a security matter and that we expect cooperation in finding him."

"Yes, sir. His home is not answering."

"Try Brother and Sister House. Try Delights of Spring House. Try Radiant Love House. Then try all the others."

"And when I find Steffens Aleksandr?"

"Tell him to wipe his cock and get to my office soonest."

"Is that message to be conveyed literally?"

"Yes!"

Back at the table, he had barely had time to fold his legs under him when Hariko told him to stop using bad language in the house where the children might hear him.

"Yes, little wife," said the man of power meekly.

"I suppose you have to go to the office again."

"Yes, little wife. An emergency — "

"Always your emergencies," said Hariko. "Why do I waste hours making you good food to eat if you're never here to eat it? And why do you employ that awful Steffens person? He's a disgrace, a man his age who lives like a tomcat. Not everyone can be as happy as we are, but everybody can have a decent, conventional life."

Yama ate quietly, occasionally agreeing with her until she ran out of words. Then he went upstairs, removed his comfortable kimono, and put on again the sour uniform he'd worn all day.

On the way down, pinching his thick neck as he tried to close the collar, he stopped in the children's bedrooms to make sure they were all asleep. The boys in their bunk beds slept the extravagant sleep of childhood. Looking at them, gently patting their cheeks, Yama reflected that adults and animals always slept as if they half expected to be awakened — children never.

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Then to the girls' room, where his daughter Kazi slumbered in the embrace of a stuffed haknim. Yama smiled at her but lingered longest at the bedside of his smallest daughter. Rika was like a doll dreaming, with a tiny bubble forming on her half-parted pink lips. He was thinking: if someone changes the past, she may vanish, never have a chance to live at all. To prevent that, he resolved to destroy without mercy every member of the time-travel conspiracy.

At the front door Hariko tied a scarf around his neck and gave him a hug; she was too modest to kiss her husband in the open doorway, even though they were twenty meters above the street. He patted her and stepped into the official hovercar that had nosed up to his porch.

"Lion House, Gate 43," he told the black box, and sank back against the cushions.

AT RADIANT LOVE HOUSE, Professor Yang relaxed from his scholarly labors on one side of a double divan in the midprice parlor and viewed 3-D images of young women to the ancient strains of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker.*

"Do you see anything that pleases you?" asked the box that was projecting the images.

"Truly, it is a Waltz of the Flowers," replied Yang sentimentally. The smell of kif wafted through the room, presumably from a hidden censer.

"The dark beauty of Miss Luvblum contrasts so markedly with the rare—indeed, unique—blondness of Miss Sekzkitti," murmured the box, going through its recorded spiel. "The almond eyes of Miss Ming remind us of the splendor of the dynasty from which she takes her *nom d'amour.* Every young lady is mediscanned on a daily basis to insure her absolute purity and freedom from disease. Miss Gandhi is skilled in all the acts of the famous *Kama Sutra.* For a small additional fee, an electronic room may be rented in which the most modern appliances are available to heighten the timeless joys of love."

Professor Yang had already halfway made his selection — the most expensive of the "stable." Miss Selassie was a tall, slender woman of Ethiopian descent who had been genetically altered into an albino. The box referred to her as "the White Tiger of the Nile," and bald, bearded,

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long-nailed Yang, at ninety-nine reaching the extreme limits of middle age, found his thoughts turning more and more to her astounding beauty. Her body is like a living Aphrodite of ancient Greece, he thought, while her face is like a living spirit mask of ancient Africa.

"Miss Selassie, how much is she?"

"One hundred khans an hour."

"Oh, dear. And how much for an electronic room?"

Professor Yang rightly believed that all the appliances known to modern science would be needed if he was to spend his expensive hour doing anything more than enjoying Miss Selassie's company.

"Fifty khans an hour. However," said the box seductively, "for such a man as yourself, Honored Professor, the house gladly makes a special price: Miss Selassie *and* an electronic room for an hour for the sum total of — "

A brief pause, during which Yang felt himself growing anxious.

"One hundred and thirty-five khans, a ten-percent reduction."

"Agreed," breathed Yang, giving himself no time to think. There was a brief flutter in the box as his bank checked his voice-print and transferred another K135 from his already deflated account to one of the bulging accounts of Radiant Love House.

"You should've asked for twenty percent off," said a voice, making Yang jump.

A long, stringy, bony man holding a kif pipe rose from the other side of the double divan and stretched and yawned.

"I hope you haven't been eavesdropping," snapped Yang.

"No more than I had to," said Stef in a bored voice. "I've made my selection, but the selectee is popular and she's busy. I'm just telling you, if you've got the balls to bargain you can get them down twenty percent, sometimes more if it's a slow night. The ten percent reduction they offer you is just merchandizing."

Resentment at the stranger's intrusion struggled with economic interest in Professor Yang's breast. The latter won.

"Really?" he said.

"Sure. I do it all the time. You could've gotten the whole works for 120."

"Indeed. And the electronic room — is it really worth it?"

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"It is if you have to have it."

Yang was just beginning to get angry when the door opened and a very tall naked woman entered. Her hair was in a thousand white braids and her eyes were oval rubies. The aureoles of her taut, almost conical breasts were much the same color as her eyes. A faint scent of faux ambergris wafted into the waiting room and mingled with the fumes of kif. Yang sat hypnotized.

"You the customer?" she asked Stef with some interest.

"No, I'm waiting for Dzhun. This guy's your customer."

"Figures," she sighed, and taking Professor Yang's thin and trembling hand in her own, the White Tiger led him away.

A few minutes later the box made two announcements: Dzhun was ready, and Stef was to wipe his cock and get to Yama's office soonest. Stef promptly did what he almost never did — lost it completely.

"FUCK THE FUCKING UNIVERSE!" he roared in English. The divan weighed a hundred kilos but he tossed it end over end. At the crash the door flew open and a guard entered, pulling an impact pistol half as long as her arm. Stef calmed down instantly.

"*Ya bi sori.* My deepest and humblest apologies," he said, clapping his hands together and bowing. "I don't know what came over me."

Stef had seen a number of bodies killed by impact weapons. A body shot usually left very little except the head, arms and legs, plus assorted fragments.

"Straighten out the goddamn sofa," said the guard, watching him narrowly. She was Mongol and looked tough. Stef did as he was told.

"Incidentally," he said as he was leaving, "I'll need a raincheck on Dzhun. I already paid my khans."

"Talk to the front desk," growled the guard.

Outside, Stef took a deep breath and ordered a hovercab. He felt that he now had a personal score to settle with the *svini* who had not only stolen a wormholer but forestalled his session with Dzhun. Since the *svini* were the only reason he currently had money enough to buy her time, that was unreasonable. But Stef wanted to be unreasonable. That was how he felt.

"So the theft was an inside job," he muttered, trying without success to get comfortable in one of Yama's black chairs.

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"Yes. A trusted scientist turns out to belong to a terrorist group that calls itself Crux. He's been checked a hundred times. Living quietly, no extra money, no nothing. During lie-detection tests, brain chemicals always indicated he was telling the truth. Trouble was, the wrong questions got asked. Are you loyal? To what? He answers yes, meaning loyal to humanity as he understands it. Are you a member of any subversive group? Subversive in what sense? To the existing order, or to humanity? He gets by with a false answer again."

"What exactly do these Crux fuckers believe in?"

"Life. The absolute value of human life. The wormholer opens the way to reverse the worst calamity in human history, the Time of Troubles. Trillions of lives are hanging on the issue — not only the lives that were lost in the famines and plagues and wars but all their descendants to the tenth generation."

Stef growled, scratched himself, longing for kif, for Dzhun. "Bunch of fucking idealists."

"Exactly. People with a vision, willing to destroy the real world for the sake of an idea. We've gotta kill them all."

Yama jumped up — a springy man, muscular, bandy-legged. He was fifty and nearing middle age, but a lifetime of the martial arts enabled him to bounce around like a ball of elastoplast.

"Kill them!" he roared, chopping at the air.

Watching him tired Stef.

"And this was what you called me back for?"

"No. Or not only." Yama fell back into the desk chair. "The group that has this grand vision is, of course, organized in cells that have to be cracked one by one. But the guy who talked in the White Chamber knew one name outside his cell, the name of a woman, an offworlder. She's called Dyeva. She's one of the founders of the movement, and she was supposed to contact him."

Stef sighed. "Anything from IC on her?"

"No," admitted Yama. "No report yet from Infocenter."

"Call me when one comes in," said Stef, rising. "I'm extremely grateful for the way you took me away from my pleasures to give me information that, as yet, has no practical significance. Please don't do it again."

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Yama saw him to the door, nodding to the Darksider who approached smelling like the shit of lions, owls and cormorants mixed together. Stef pinched his nostrils and spoke like a duck.

"I love coming to your office, Yama. The place has a certain air about it."

Half an hour later, Stef was again sprawled in the middling expensive parlor at Radiant Love House, waiting. Another customer had taken Dzhun while he was away. Stef spent the time smoking kif and thinking about shooting Dyeva, whoever she was, with an impact pistol.

"*Phut,*" he said, imitating the uninspiring sound of the weapon. He made his long hands into a ball and drew them rapidly apart, imitating the explosion inside the target. Stef had studied wound ballistics and he knew that impact ammo vaporized in the body and formed a rapidly expanding sphere of superheated gas and destructive particles. *Dyeva v'átomi sa dizolva,* he thought. The *svin* flies apart, turns to molecules, atoms, protons and quarks.

"How happy I am," murmured the box, "to inform you, Sir, that the person of your choice is ready to receive you."

Instantly Stef was up and moving, his bloody thoughts forgotten. At heart he was a lover, not a killer.

In the blue peace of the electronic room, Professor Yang lay huddled under a sheet of faux silk.

Beside him, her hand still languidly resting on a gadget called an erector-injector, lay a statue of living ivory. At least he now knew the White Tiger's given name. Even if it was only a prost's working name, a *nom d'amour,* for Yang it was what the old French phrase meant — a name of love.

"Selina," he murmured, and she turned her head and smiled at him.

"I'm afraid your time is up," she whispered. "But perhaps you'll come again, my dear. You were special."

"Selina," he said again. Around him monitors winked and a low electromagnetic hum soothed with a white sound. Yang was all too conscious of the birth of a new obsession, one even less affordable than four wives and natural sugar.

"I *must* see you again," he said.

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Detecting the urgent note in his voice, Selina smiled. Ah, that enigmatic whore's smile! thought Yang with pain in his heart. What did it mean? Pleasure in you, pleasure in your money, no pleasure at all but mere professionalism? Who could tell?

Wasn't this how he had happened to marry the most obnoxious of his four wives?

Dyeva sat quietly in the front room of a small but elegant suburban villa.

The windows were open and the morning sun entered through a gentle screen of glossy leaves thrown out by a lemon tree. The room held all the necessities of rustic living, bare beams across the ceiling, lounges covered with faux linen, a glass table bearing apples and oranges and kuvisu fruit, and a mashina half the length of the wall to entertain the owner, a Professor of Rhetoric whose hobby was playing at revolution.

Relaxing on the lounges were the other members of the cell: two students and a dark and tensely attractive woman of middle age who bore a painted mark on her forehead. The students were still talking about Professor Yang's lecture of last evening, tailor-made as it seemed for the members of Crux.

"Lord Buddha, but he makes you see it," said the boy, fingering a string of beads restlessly. He was an Old Believer. Dyeva had noticed years ago that such people were represented in Crux far beyond their numbers in the general population.

The girl was lovely: bronzed, yellow-haired, sloe-eyed, the perfect Eurasian. She called herself Dián and spoke in a throaty whisper that someone had told her was mysterious.

"Actually, he's a horrible old man. But it's as Kuli says, he has the gift of making the past live."

"*We* expect to do more along that line," said the owner of the villa in a deep, resonant voice, and the two young people laughed happily. All three of them loved the taste of conspiracy; the older man, whose codename was Zet, earnestly hoped to seduce Dián. Supposedly nobody in the group knew anybody else's real name. They had a vast and fundamentally childish panoply of measures to preserve secrecy — passwords, hand signals, ways of passing information in complicated and difficult ways.

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Because cyberspace was a favorite hunting ground for the supermashini of the Security Forces, they avoided electronic contact whenever possible. Instead, they had oaths, secret meetings, symbols. Their key symbol was the looped cross of ancient Egypt, the *crux ansata* — the sign of life.

Kuli wore a crux on a cord around his neck; at meetings he took it out for all to see. The girl, Dyeva noted with amazement, had the symbol tattooed on the palm of one slender hand. Why didn't the senior members of the cell force her to have it removed?

People had often told Dyeva that she had icewater in her veins. That wasn't true: her emotions were intense, only deeply buried. Right now anger and alarm were stirring deep beneath her masklike face. Did her life, to say nothing of the lives of trillions of human beings, depend on these amateurs, children?

The dark woman, who called herself Lata, brushed a hand across her brow and said, "The essential thing is to speed our visitor safely on her way. And I must tell all of you something I learned last night. The theft of the wormholer has been discovered and there have been arrests."

"*Arrests*?" demanded Dián, in a scandalized tone. "Of someone I *know*?"

She seemed to think that the polizi had no right to arrest members of a secret organization merely because it was bent on annihilating the existing world.

"No," sighed Lata. "Fortunately for you. That beast Kathmann and the polizi drugged and tortured both the guards and the people who were responsible for technical maintenance of the wormholer. Thus they learned that one of the scientists had been involved in the theft. Thank God, the device had already been turned over to another cell, and the poor man who talked didn't know their names or where it is at present."

The two young people seemed paralyzed. Zet was turning his head from side to side, looking at the furniture, the fresh fruit. Dyeva had no trouble reading his mind: the *glupetz* had suddenly realized that he could lose all this by playing at conspiracy. Some day, she thought, if he thinks about it long enough, he will realize that he may lose much more.

"I will go with you," said Dyeva, rising and pointing at Lata, apparently the only one of the gathering with any sense. "You will conduct me. I must not stay here longer and endanger these heroes of humanity."

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Zet looked relieved at the news she'd soon be gone; Kuli and Dián were still absorbing the news of the arrests. He was stunned, she indignant.

"Oh, but the people who were tortured — they're martyrs!" she exclaimed suddenly and burst into tears.

"Yes," said Dyeva, "and by this time they are also corpses. Death is the reward the technicians of the Chamber hold out to their victims. I will be packed and gone in five minutes if you will lead me," she said to Lata.

"Of course," said the dark woman, and Dyeva hastened to the room where she had slept to gather her kit.

Later, in Lata's hovercar, Dyeva asked her how she had come to join the movement.

"I despise this world," Lata said quietly. "It's a gutter of injustice and pain. Nothing will be lost if this world suddenly vanishes at the word of Lord Krishna. Of course, if we manage to undo the Troubles, success will cost us our own lives. That is the splendor of Crux. If our movement did not demand the ultimate sacrifice I would not have joined it."

Another Old Believer, though Dyeva, only this time of the Hindu type. And I was brought up a Christ-worshipper, and the boy Kuli is a Buddhist. Are we all remnants and leftovers of a dead world? Is that why we wish to restore it?

"What are you thinking?" asked Lata.

"Wondering why the movement contains so many Old Believers."

"Oh, I think I know. It's because we want to undo the death of our faiths. So many people simply stopped believing after the Troubles. They said to themselves, There is no God. Or, if there is and he allows this to happen, I do not care about him."

Dyeva glanced at her curiously. They were entering the air-space above Ulanor and Lata paid frowning attention to the traffic until a beam picked up her car's black box. For an instant Dyeva had a powerful urge to continue this conversation, to talk about things that had real meaning. Then she remembered that the less Lata knew about her, and she about Lata, the better for both of them.

"We all come to it for different reasons," she said guardedly, and silence followed. The little car revolved above the Worldcity, bearing two women who hoped to change it into a phantasm that never had existed at all.

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Stef and Dzhun were having breakfast in a teashop deep in the Clouds and Rain District. Half the customers seemed to recognize Dzhun, and she waved and blew kisses to them. She had scrubbed off her white working makeup and with it had gone her nighttime pretense of lotus delicacy and passivity. She looked and was a tough young woman to whom life had not been kind.

"Wild turnover last night," she said to a red-haired eunuch who had stopped by the table to shriek and fondle her. "I did ten guys."

"Oh my dear," said the *sisi*, "I do ten on my way to work."

"Seems you've got some catching up to do," Stef told Dzhun when the *sisi* had moved on.

"Oh, he's such a bragger. And old, too. When I'm his age I'll have my own house and instead of bragging about doing ten guys I'll be doing one — the one I choose."

"And that one will be me."

"Only if you get rich," said Dzhun candidly, buttering a bun. "I'm tired of being a *robotchi*, a working stiff. I've got a senator on the string now, Stef, did I tell you? Soon you won't be able to afford me at all."

She dimpled as she always did when saying unpalatable things.

"Is that why I'm buying you breakfast?"

"Oh Stef, I'm just needling you. I love my poor friends, too. Look, why don't you take me to Lake Bai for a week or two? Get a cabin. I won't demand a villa. Not yet."

"Unfortunately, I'm on a big case right now. One that might even save your life."

Dzhun stopped eating and stared at him. "You're telling the truth?"

"Believe it. When the payoff comes, it'll be as big as the case. Then we'll go to Bai. Get a villa, not a cabin."

Stef spoke with the calm assurance he employed when he was in a state of total uncertainty. The investigation was dead in the water. The arrests had not led to the wormholer. IC still hadn't come up with a make on Dyeva. Mashini were combing passenger lists of recent arrivals from the offworlds — voiceprints, retinographs, DNA samples — turning up nobody with a record, nobody who fit the profiles. Stef's local contacts had nothing to offer.

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"What's it all about, Stef?" asked Dzhun.

"Never mind. The case is a beheader. It's nothing you want to know about, so don't ask. It's a security matter and it'd be a hell of a shame if the Darksiders came and carted off a butt like yours to the White Chamber."

Their voices had fallen to whispers. Dzhun's face was so close that Stef's breath moved her long eyelashes. A delicate scent clung to her kimono, some nameless offworld flower, and the drooping faux silk disclosed the roundness of her little breasts like pomegranates. Stef could have eaten her with a spoon.

"I won't say anything," she promised. "If anybody asks what you're doing, I'll say that you never tell me anything."

Stef leaned back and sipped the bitter green tea he used to clear his head in the morning. Effortlessly, Dzhun put her whore's persona on again, screaming and waving at a friend who had just entered the teashop. Towering over the crowd, the White Tiger of the Nile headed for their table.

She and Dzhun kissed and Selina sat down, nodding at Stef.

"Hell of a night," she said to them and the world in general. "I did a dozen guys."

"Oh, Selina," said Dzhun. "Honey, I do a dozen on my way to work."

YAMASHITA CLAPPED his hands and bowed to announce himself to the *fromazhi* — the big cheeses. It was the morning meeting of the Secret Emergency Committee that had been formed to deal with the wormholer theft.

Yama's boss, Oleary, Deputy Controller of the Lion Sector, grunted a welcome, adding, "You know these people, I'm sure."

Considering that he was talking about the Solar System Controller, her deputy the Earth Controller, her Chief of Security, and Admiral Hrka of the Far Space Service, that was inadequate to say the least.

The SSC was Xian Xi-Qing, a small woman with a parchment face, tiny hands and dull gold and jade rings stacked two and three to a finger. She was famous for many things, her three husbands, her stable of male concubines, the ruthlessness and cleverness that had kept her alive and in power for decades.

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She glared at Yama and demanded abruptly, "We've heard from Kathmann. At least he's caught somebody. What are *you* doing about this wormholer business? I've heard rumors the conspiracy originated in your sector."

Yama took his time seating himself on a backless chair known as the *shozit,* or hot seat. The grandees faced him behind a Martian gilt table surrounded by an invisible atmosphere of power. Admiral Hrka, Yama noted, wasn't even wearing his nine stars. That was the ultimate sign of status. Nobody needed to see *his* rating.

Among the bureaucrats, the admiral looked and probably felt out of place. Hrka usually dealt with the arcane business of moving in Far Space — using inertial compensators and particle beam trans-lightspeed accelerators, navigating by mag space forcelines and staging chronometric reentries where an error of a microsecond could put him deep inside the glowing core of a planet. He was accustomed to using atomlasers that could melt steel at half a million clicks, launching supertorps at near-light velocities and converting the enemies of his species into plasma thinner than the solar wind.

Now he found himself face to face with a threat that might enable one fragile human to undo his world and render all his knowledge and bravery pointless. He looked as if he longed to be in Far Space now, where even if he was a thousand light years from anyplace he knew where he was.

Seated to one side was Kathmann, Yama's opposite number in Earth Security. He resembled a files technician, with his pointed head and fat neck. He wore replacement eyes and the plastic corneas glittered blankly.

Quietly Yama laid out the steps taken so far to locate members of Crux. The notion that the conspiracy had grown up in the Lion Sector remained unproven, yet diligent inquiries were underway on all the Sector's two hundred and thirty-six inhabited worlds. All available mag space transponder circuits had been cleared for this one task. Enough energy to light Ulanor for six weeks had already been poured into the message traffic. The whole business was necessarily slow; even at maximum power, a message routed through mag space from the farthest planets of the Sector took more than seventy standard hours to reach Earth.

And so on. Actually he had nothing to report and his aim was to make

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nothing sound like something. When he was done the *fromazhi*, who knew bureaucratic boilerplate when they heard it, just sat there looking bored. Only Kathmann spoke up.

"All your inquiries are on offworlds?"

"Certainly. That's where our authority begins and ends."

"You're not invading my territory, using unofficial agents here on Earth?"

Yama was shocked.

"*Onor kolleg, eto ne'legalni!*" he exclaimed. "Honored colleague, that's illegal!"

Kathmann raised one fat fist and stared at Yama with eyes like worn silver half-khan pieces.

"Remember, Colonel, this hand holds the keys to the White Chamber!"

Yama raised his own much solider fist.

"And this one, Colonel Kathmann, has killed a thousand enemies of the State!"

The spat had Admiral Hrka grinning.

"Simmer down, boys," he said, while the Earth Controller, a man named Ugaitish, muttered into his beard, "*Spokai, spokai.* Take it easy."

"What I want to know," said Oleary in a fretful tone, "is why anybody built this goddamn gadget in the first place. If it didn't exist it couldn't be stolen."

"It was some idiots at the University," said Ugaitish. "They just had to see if the theory worked. They applied for a permit, all very legal, and some minor official gave them an *oké* for the materials, which are pretty exotic. There's no use putting them in the White Chamber," he added, waving a hand to shut Kathmann up.

Xian agreed. "Typical academics. All they know is what they know. Not an atom of common sense."

"Besides," Ugaitish added, "the academics were the ones who reported the theft. Except for that, nobody would know anything about it."

"They should be beheaded anyway," Kathmann growled, "to get rid of the dangerous knowledge in their brains. A laser can do it in five seconds, and there you are."

Yama's sharp eyes intercepted the glance that passed among the

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fromazhi. Kathmann made them uneasy — a man who knew too much and executed too readily. Yama filed away this insight for future reference.

"At this point, beheading is not the issue," declared Hrka. "Let me sum up. A woman, name unknown, took a commercial ship, probably somewhere in the Lion Sector — now there's a big volume of space to cover — and traveled to Earth, where she has, perhaps, contacted a group of terrorists who intend to obliterate our world by changing the past. The group has a functional wormholer, calls itself Crux, and in the most overpoliced human society since the fall of the Imperial Chinese People's Republic nobody knows who they are or where they are. Have I stated the situation clearly?"

Xian glared first at him, then at the two cops in turn.

"You better find them," she said, "or I'll put you *both* in the White Chamber."

She let that sink in, then said more formally: "Honored security chiefs, we permit you to go."

When they were gone, Xian told the others, "We need information now. Ugaitish is putting out a public call for help. We don't have to tell everything, just that a gang of terrorists called Crux is on the loose, planning to kill many innocent people."

"Is that wise?" worried Oleary. "Informing the masses seems like an extreme step to me."

"If we don't, the politicians will. I have to brief the President and the Senate today, and what do you think will happen then?"

"Much smoke, much heat, no light," said Hrka fatalistically. "Well, we'd better catch these bastards. The whole world order as we know it exists only because of the Time of Troubles. Without that, everything would be different."

The *fromazhi* stared at each other. "Great Tao," said Ugaitish, "if these scoundrels succeed — even if we continue to exist at all, we might be anything. Coolies, prisoners, offworld scum!"

"Ask for help," Oleary told Xian. "If necessary, beg."

After his night in the District, Stef needed sleep. Yet he spent a couple of hours at his mashina, checking his regular contacts for hints of terrorist

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groups. He heard gossip about lunatics who wanted to blow up Genghis' tomb, but nothing of interest to him. So he went to bed.

The daytime noises rising from Golden Horde Street had no power to keep him awake. He had slept away too many days, sunk in the half light admitted from the roofed balcony, embracing rumpled bedcovers in the brown shadows of afternoon. In a few minutes he drifted off, but not for long.

He woke suddenly thinking he must have shit on himself. He reached for his pistol just as a crushing furry weight fell on him.

The ceiling light went on and the Darksider rolled Stef over and sat on his back. For an agonized few moments he couldn't breathe at all, while the creature, aided by a human Stef never saw clearly, thrust his hands into a kang and locked the wrists. Then the Darksider rose, bent down over its gasping victim and lifted him so that the kang could be clamped on his neck as well. A four-fingered, two-thumbed hand gripped his hair and pulled him to a sitting position.

Spots drifted before his eyes in a red torrent that slowly cleared. Stef was sitting naked on the bed with a black plastic kang clamped on his wrists and neck. His faint hope that this might be a nightmare died. The Darksider was standing bow-legged by the bed and scratching its chest. The human seemed to be wearing a polizi uniform; he kept to the shadows just beyond the limits of Stef's vision. Head immobilized, Stef tried to twist his body to get a view of his captor, but without success.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Your guide, Mr. Steffens. I'm here to show you something you never saw before."

"What?"

"The inside of the White Chamber."

At a gesture, the Darksider tossed a sack over Stef's head and pulled a cord tight around his neck. A hypodermic gun spat at his shoulder and he had a horrifying sense that his whole body was melting into a cold and lifeless fluid before darkness descended.

He would have preferred not to wake up, but wake he did. Still in the kang, still with the sack over his head. Of course you're not comfortable, he told himself. You're not supposed to be comfortable. He had no idea how long he'd been here, except that he was thirsty and hungry. No idea

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where "here" was, except somewhere in the warrens of the White Chamber.

He had urinated at some point and was sitting in the wet. The cell was so small that his knees were folded up against his chest. His icy toes pressed against metal that was probably the door. The cell was narrower than the kang, and Stef had to sit with his body twisted. There was no way to move, no way to rest. As the hours passed, agonizing pains began to shoot through his back and side. Breathing became difficult. He began suffering waves of panic at the thought that the polizi would leave him here until he slowly suffocated. The panic made things worse; he started to hyperventilate, and every breath stabbed him like a knife. He tried to calm himself, counting slow shallow breaths that didn't hurt so much.

Then voices approached along a corridor outside the cell. Faint hope was followed by stomach-knotting fear. They might let me go; it was all a mistake; Yama will get me out. No, Yama doesn't know anything and anyway he doesn't control the polizi. They're coming to torture me.

The voices came close. Two techs were discussing a "client," as they called their victims. Voices neutral, atonal like the voices of two black boxes.

"Maybe twenty cc of gnosine would do it."

"I dunno. This client is a tough case."

"Maybe needles in the spinal marrow..."

They were gone. A faint noise in the distance remained unidentifiable until a door in the corridor slid open. Then Stef heard a whimpering, sobbing sound that made all the hairs rise on the back of his neck. Extreme agony, he thought — beyond screaming.

The door slid shut again and the sound became a low meaningless murmur. Human footsteps approached again. Two voices.

"Just wonderful, Doctor. I never thought she'd break."

"Sometimes a combination of therapies is essential."

They too were gone. Doctors. Technicians. Therapies. Clients. The language of the Chamber. We are not sadists, we are scientists performing a distasteful but necessary function in the cause of justice. Try the gnosine, try the needles, try everything in combination. Promise the clients life; after you've worked on them for a while, promise them death.

When the polizi came at last, they came in silence. Without the

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slightest warning the door clanged open. Somebody yelled, "Get the scum! Get the piece of shit!"

A Darksider grabbed Stef's legs and dragged him into the hall and the wrench on his cramped limbs made him scream. Then the animal was dragging him down the hall by the heels while boots kicked at Stef's ribs and head.

The kang knocked against the walls and floor. A human hand grabbed his testicles and twisted and he screamed again, louder than before. Then somebody, a crowd of them, human and inhuman, seized the ends of the kang and dragged him to his feet.

"Walk! Walk, you piece of shit! Walk!"

He couldn't and fell and somebody kicked him hard in the groin and this time he did no screaming. He was unconscious.

He woke with intense light in his eyes. He was sitting in a hard duroplast chair and the sack was off his head. His eyes burned; agony rose in waves from his groin. Somebody in hard boots stamped on the bare toes of his left foot.

Stef wasn't thinking any longer, he was living in nothing but the conviction that every second some new pain would strike. What next, what next? Hands seized the kang and pulled it back. Other hands, some human, some inhuman, grabbed his ankles and stretched out his legs. In the blazing light he was half blind, absolutely helpless. Somebody touched his breastbone and he moaned and his stomach knotted, expecting the blow.

Nothing happened. The light dimmed. Gradually his eyes cleared. A man with a pointed head was standing before him. The man had plastic eyes that went blank when he moved his head. There was no crowd of tormentors, only two thuggi from Earth Central and one Darksider. One of the thuggi gave the other a piece of candy and they stood there, chewing. The Darksider scratched its furry backside against a wall.

"Mr. Steffens."

"Yes," whispered Stef.

"I'm sending you home now. For the future, will you remember one thing?"

"Yes."

"From now on, Yamashita will continue to pay you, but in spite of

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that you'll be working for me as well as for him, and I'll expect to know everything you do and everything you discover about Crux."

Kathmann leaned forward and once again tapped Stef's breastbone.

"If you hide anything from me, I'll know it, and I'll bring you back here. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Next time you'll get standard treatment," added Kathman, straightening up. "Not the grandmotherly kindness you received this time."

To the thuggi he said, "Give him one more."

He left the room and a door closed. Behind the light the room flickered and a second Darksider Stef hadn't seen before approached him, holding a spiked club in its paws. But that'll kill me, he thought, and his eyes clamped shut on a final vision of the new Darksider raising the club for a smashing blow to his gut.

He sat there blind, waiting. Then he heard them laughing at him. He opened his eyes as one of the thuggi unlocked the kang. The other was grinning. The Darksider with the club flickered, evaporated. A three-dimensional laser image, created, Stef now saw, by projectors mounted high up on the walls.

"The boss likes to have his little joke," the thug explained with a wink. The real Darksider was still scratching its butt. Insofar as an animal could, it looked absolutely bored.

Outside was deep night or earliest morning. Wrapped in a blanket and shivering uncontrollably, Stef rode home in a polizi hovercar. Before dawn he was in his own bed, wracked by pain from toes to scalp. Yet he slept, and by noon was able to creep to the balcony, dragging one foot behind him. He walked bowlegged, because his scrotum was the size of a grapefruit.

Slowly, very slowly, he prepared kif and lay down. He was starving but wouldn't have dreamed of getting up to look for food.

He smoked and the drug dulled everything, pain and hunger alike, and let him sleep. In all the world only kif was merciful. No wonder it was his religion.

By nightfall Stef was minimally better. He slept long, despite nightmares that left him drenched with sweat. By morning he was functional enough to bathe (he smelled worse than a Darksider by then) and dress.

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Then he called Yama on his mashina, hoping the polizi would monitor his call — he wanted to remind them that he had powerful friends.

"Stef. What's up?"

"I just wanted you to know that your pal Kathmann had me in the White Chamber. I'm working for him now, too."

"That son of a bitch. He hurt you much?"

"It wasn't a picnic. But I've been through worse."

"Yeah, I know you're a survivor. Well, I guess we got to share anything we find out with Earth Central. But I'm going to see Kathmann and tell him if he grabs you again, I'll send Oleary to see Xian herself. You got anything broken, like bones?"

"No."

"Well, at least the miserable bastard went light on you."

Stef next called a neighborhood babaku shop and ordered food. Then he found his pistol, made sure it was loaded, and returned to his kif pipe.

On the balcony he smoked and thought about ways to kill Kathmann. He had two people on his list now: Dyeva, because she wanted to destroy his world, Kathmann because he had — well, not tortured Stef; what had happened was too trivial to be called torture. No, Kathmann had simply been getting his attention in the inimitable polizi way.

This wasn't the first time in his life that Stef had been completely abased and humiliated. But he decided now that it was to be the last. He pointed his pistol at the wall and said, *"Phut."*

After Dyeva, Kathmann was next.

THAT EVENING Professor Yang again stood before his mashina, which was set to Transmit and Record. A memory cube nestled in the queue. Lights arranged by his servant illuminated Yang against a background of ancient books that had been imprinted on the wall by a digital image-transfer process. (Real books were too expensive for a scholar to afford.)

Watching the interest indicator with a sharp eye, Yang launched into the second lecture of his course, Origin of Our World. His subject today was the response to the Troubles: the slow repopulation of the Earth by humans and the reintroduction of hundreds of extinct animal species whose DNA had fortunately been preserved for low-gravity study on Luna.

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He spoke of the first halting steps toward Far Space and of the gradual emergence of humanity from the cocoon of the Solar System during three hundred years of experiment and daring colonization. He spoke of the new morality that emerged from the Time of Troubles, the ecolaws that limited the size of families and prescribed a human density of no more than one person per thousand hectares of land surface on any inhabited planet. (Great populations tend to produce political instability, to say nothing of epidemics.)

He spoke of the Great Diaspora, the scattering of humankind among the stars to insure that what had almost happened in the past could never happen again. He spoke of a species obsessed with security and order, and pointed out what a good thing it was that people had, for once, learned from the past, so that they would never have to repeat it. He spoke about the liquidation of democracy and explained the strange term as a Greek word meaning "mob rule." He ended with a kindly word or two about the friendly aliens like the Darksiders who had now become part of humanity's march toward ever greater heights of stability and glory.

All across the city, students were recording the lecture. So were people who were not students but had a hunger for learning. In his apartment, Stef listened because he was still recovering from his night in the Chamber and had nothing else to do. His chief reaction to Yang's version of history was sardonic amusement.

"Pompous old *glupetz*," he muttered.

In another shabby apartment, this one opening on a rundown warren of buildings near the university called Jesus and Buddha Court, Kuli — whose real name was Ananda — and the beautiful Dián — whose real name was Iris — also listened to Yang. Their reactions tended less to laughter and more to scorn.

"I liked the bit about the Darksiders," said Ananda, fingering his rosary. "A bunch of smelly barbarians our lords and masters use as mercenaries to suppress human freedom."

"You're so right," said Iris, shutting off the box. "How I hate that man."

"Oh well, he's just a professor," said Ananda tolerantly. "What can you expect. Look, is there a Crux meeting this week?"

"I don't know. Lata will have to message us, won't she? Nobody we

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know has been arrested. Maybe the excitement's over," she added optimistically.

"I thought Zet was getting spooked."

"Well, he's old. Old people get scared so easily."

She smiled and sat down on the arm of his chair. Ananda used his free hand to rub her smooth back. Not for the first time in history, conspiracy had led to romance. The relationship had begun with talk and more talk; change the past, restore life to the victims of the Troubles and at the same time erase this world of cruelty and injustice. Neither Ananda nor Iris could imagine that they might cease to exist if the past were changed; they thought that somehow they would continue just about as they were. Maybe better.

Growing intimate, they had told each other their real names; that had been a crucial step, filled with daring trust and a quiver of fear — somewhat like their first time getting naked together. The fact that Ananda in the past had told other girls his name and had tried to recruit them for Crux was something that Iris didn't know.

Indeed, Ananda had forgotten the others too, for he was floating in his new love like a fly in honey. In the middle of the disheveled apartment, surrounded by discarded hardcopy, rumpled bedding, a few stray cats for whom Ananda felt a brotherly concern, Iris of haunting beauty bent and touched her lips to those of the ugly young man with the rosary at his belt.

"I'd better go," she murmured. "I've got a lab." Her tone said to him, Make me stay.

"In a minute," said Ananda, tightening his grip. "You can go in just a minute."

A few streets away, in a less shabby student apartment occupied by four young women, the mashina was still playing after Yang's lecture, only now switched to a commercial program.

One of the women was insisting that she needed to make a call, but the other three were watching a story of sex among the stars called *The Far Side of the Sky* and voted her down.

"You can wait, Taka," they said firmly. Taka, who was twenty, had begun to argue when a news bulletin suddenly interrupted the transmission.

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"Suppose I make my call now — " she started to say, when something about the bulletin caught her attention.

"Hush up," she told the others, who were bitterly complaining about the interruption of the story just as the hero had embraced the heroine deep in mag space.

"I want to hear this," said Taka.

After the bulletin the story quickly resumed. Taka thoughtfully retired to her bedroom and sat down on the floor, folded her slim legs gracefully under her, and reached for her compwrite. The compwrite transmitted through the mashina in the other room but gave her privacy to work.

"A letter," she said, "to — "

Who? She wondered. Daddy had always told her to obey the law but have nothing to do with the polizi, who were, he said, scum, *gryaz*, filth. How then to get her information to them without using the boxcode that had appeared on the screen during the newsflash?

"To Professor Yang, History Faculty," she began, rattling off the university address code from memory. "Send this with no return address, *oké*?"

"I am waiting, O woman of transcendent beauty," said the compwrite. Taka herself had taught it to say that and was now trying to make it learn how to giggle.

"Honored Professor, I am sending this to you as a person I honor and trust and admire," she began, laying it on thick.

"I have always been a law-abiding person and there was a news bulletin just now where the polizi were asking for information about a terrorist group called the Crooks. Well, a student named Ananda, when he was trying to climb aboard — scratch that, make love to me a couple of months ago, stated that he belonged to this group and tried to make it seem incredibly important, though I had never heard of it myself up to that time. In any case my native dialect is English and I happen to know what Crooks means and I was angry that somebody would try to involve me in something criminal.

"Hoping that you will convey this info to the proper authorities, I remain one of your students choosing to remain anonymous."

She viewed this missive on the screen and then added, "PS, this

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Ananda is an ugly guy with a rosary of some kind he wears on his belt. I think he's an O.B. He is skinny and wears a funny kind of cross under his jacket. He says it is a symbol of something I forget what."

She added, "Send," and headed back into the front room, where the current chapter of *The Far Side of the Sky* had expired in a shudder of Far Space orgasms.

"Well, I suppose I can make my call now," she said, and did so, setting up an appointment for tomorrow with the mashina of a depilator who had promised to leave her arms and legs as smooth as babyflesh, which she thought would look very nice.

Professor Yang's infatuation with Selina was leading him deeper and deeper into debt. He tried to stay away from Radiant Love House, but instead found himself dreaming of the White Tiger all day and heading for the District by hovercab at least three times a week.

He told himself all the usual things — that this was ridiculous in a man his age, that he would lose face if his frequent visits became known, that he couldn't afford this new extravagance. No argument could sway him; he wanted his woman of ivory in the blue peace of the electronic room where for an hour at least he feasted on the illusion of youth regained.

He was again in the middling expensive parlor waiting for the White Tiger when Stef lounged in and collapsed on the double divan.

Ordinarily, Yang would have ignored the fellow, but when Stef said, "How are you, Honored Professor?" he felt he had to say something in return.

"Quite well." Brief, cool.

"I watched your last lecture," said Stef, who was inclined to chat, knowing that as usual he had time to kill before Dzhun could receive him.

"Really," said Yang, thawing slightly. He was paid .10 khan for every box that tuned in to his lectures. It wasn't much, but he needed every tenth he could get.

"Yeah. I'm not a student, but I am ill-educated and I occasionally try to improve my mind, such as it is."

Stef pulled over a wheeled censer, dumped a little kif into it from a pouch he carried, and turned on the heating element.

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"Inhale?" he asked, unwinding two hoses and handing one to Yang.

"The waiting is tiresome," Yang allowed, and took an experimental puff. Finding the quality acceptable (local kif, not Martian, but pretty good) he took another.

"May I ask your profession?"

"Investigative agent. I'm also a licensed member of the Middlemen and Fixers' Guild."

"Ah." Yang looked at Stef sharply. "Are you good at what you do?"

"Well, I live by it and have for years. Why? Need something looked into?"

"Actually," said Yang slowly, "I received an anonymous letter a few days ago and I've been wondering how to handle it. It claims to place in my hands certain information that I, ah, feel somebody in authority ought to know. Yet I have no way of checking it or naming the sender, who claims to be a student of mine. It may be worthless; on the other hand, if it's useful, well — "

"You'd like to be paid for it," said Stef promptly. "I can handle that. Insulate you from the polizi. There are ways to handle it confidentially and at the same time claim a reasonable reward if the information's good. What's it all about?"

Yang thought for a moment and then said, "It concerns something called Crux."

All of Stef's long training was just barely sufficient to enable him to keep a *marmolitz* — a marble face.

"Ah," he said, clearing his throat, "the thing that was on the box a few nights ago?"

"Yes."

Briefly he told Stef about the letter, witholding, however, the name Ananda and his description.

"What do you think it might be worth?"

"How happy I am," interrupted the box in the corner, "to inform you, honored guest, that Dzhun is now ready to receive you."

"Tell her to wait," said Stef.

To Yang he said, "Let me try to find out if the matter's really important. If so, I wouldn't hesitate to ask ten thousand khans in return for such information."

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"Ten *thousand*?"

The kif pipe fell out of his mouth.

"It must be something major," Stef pointed out, "or it wouldn't have been put on the air. At the same time, I would recommend caution. This is clearly a security matter, and you certainly wouldn't want to expose yourself to the suspicion of knowing more than you actually do. That's a short path to the White Chamber. Luckily, I have a friend on the inside who's not polizi and can make inquiries."

"And your, ah, fee?" asked Yang.

"A flat ten percent of the award. I'm an ethical investigator."

"Good heavens," said Yang, who was perfectly indifferent to Stef's professional ethics but whose mind was engaged in dividing K9,000 by 120 to reached the astounding figure of seventy-five hour-long sessions with the White Tiger in the electronic room.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"Your chop on my standard contract, one sheet of hardcopy with the message, and about two days."

"You shall, my friend," said Professor Yang rather grandly, "have all three."

YAMA AND STEF sat at the duroplast desk in the Lion House staring at the hardcopy.

"One name. And what a crappy description. Maybe I should turn Yang over to Kathmann just to see if he knows anything more."

"An honored professor? Come on, Yama. Stop thinking like a security gorilla for once. Yang doesn't know a damn thing except that he needs money to rent his albino. What we need is to find this Ananda."

"How? Call in the polizi?"

"Hell, no. Get the credit yourself. First of all, access the university records. Tell your mashina to search for Ananda as both a family name and a given name. Let's say for the last two years. Do you have access to the polizi and city records?"

"That's Earth Central stuff," said Yama with a cunning look. "It's off limits to us. Of *course* I've got access."

"When you get some names from the university, have the box start

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calling their numbers and checking the faces of these Anandas. That'll eliminate some — they can't all be skinny, ugly guys — and meanwhile you can be having the names checked against the polizi records for arrests and against the city records for everything else — property ownership, energy payments, tax payments, everything. Then there's the Old Believer angle — "

Yama was already talking to his box. "I want confidential access to university records. Now."

He turned back to Stef. "By the way, how much is this costing me, assuming it leads to anything?"

"If it leads to Crux, I promised Yang fifteen thousand."

"Petty cash," said Yama. "*If* it leads to Crux."

The box chimed. "Sir, I have accessed the university central administrative files."

"Search admission, registration and expulsion records for the name Ananda," said Yama promptly, "especially expulsion." He added to Stef, "Terrorists are often students, but very few of them are good students."

Dreaming of the money, Stef paced the room impatiently. The university records were voluminous and ill-kept. There was no Ananda as a family name. Searching given names was just getting underway — "This baby does it in nanoseconds," promised Yama — when the whole university system went down. And stayed down.

After more than an hour of waiting and pacing and dreaming of kif, Stef lounged out, holding his nose until he was past the Darksider, and took a hovercab home. There he called Earth Central and reported to one of Kathmann's aides that he and Yama were following down an anonymous tip that a student was a member of Crux.

Then he called Yang and told him that the money was practically in hand. Yang was ecstatic.

"You don't know what this means to me, honored investigative agent," he bubbled. "I've had so many calls on my purse lately."

"I know what you mean."

"What do you think this Crux organization might be?"

"I don't have the slightest idea," Stef lied. "In English the word means, uh, the essential thing. Like the crux of an argument."

"Of course there's also the Latin meaning."

"What's Latin?"

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"It's a dead language. The original source of the word. In Latin it means cross. Hence the crossroads, the critical point."

"Ananda wears a funny kind of cross," said Stef slowly.

"Yes. My informant thought he was an Old Believer."

"I wonder — "

Stef's box chimed. He quickly made arrangements to bring Yang his payoff and cut the circuit.

"Say," he told the box.

"Stef, I got the names," said Yama, abrupt as usual. "Got your recorder on? Here they are. Last year, Govind Ananda, withdrawn. This year, Patal Ananda, Nish Ananda, Sivastheni Ananda. That's all."

"Boxcodes?"

"Got 'em all except Govind. Like so many of those damn students, he may have a pirated mashina. I'm having the box call the ones we've got, and at the same time start running through the city records. Got any more bright ideas?"

"No," said Stef, "except I want a vacation when this is over. And my pay."

"Stop kidding me, I know you'll take your pay out of old Yang's reward money. Don't try to...wait a minute. Box reports Patal and Sivas-whatever don't resemble the description. Nish is away from home. Wait a minute again. Govind Ananda paid the energy bill on No. 71, Jesus and Buddha Court. Didn't the letter say something about a rosary? And about him being an O.B.?"

"Keep trying Nish, Yama, but send three or four of your thuggi to meet me at J and B Court. I'm going to try Govind. I like the smell of that address. It's near the University and the names would echo for an Old Believer."

"You got 'em. Plus a Darksider in case things get rough."

"And a gas mask."

Stef rang off, plunged into a battered Korean-style chest on his balcony and brought out his one-centimeter impact pistol. He touched the clip control and chambered one of the fat, black-headed rounds.

Action elated him, freed him from his memories of being beaten, his sense of uselessness. Suddenly he felt wonderful, better than when he was on kif, better than when he was drunk, almost better than when he was about to make love. A flutter of fear in his belly was part of the frisson. So was the taste of iron filings beginning to fill his mouth.

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He rummaged through his closet, dragged out his most ample jacket, tore the right-hand pocket to give him access to the space between cloth and lining. Hand in pocket, he pressed the gun against his ribs to hide any bulge and slipped through the door, listening to it click behind him, wondering if he would ever unlatch it again. He whispered a goodbye to Dzhun. On the roof he signaled for a hovercab.

"Jesus and Buddha Court," he said, when one drew up.

The cab's black box said, "Gratizor."

On Lake Bai in the evening the tinkle of samisen music mixed with the thrumming of a Spanish guitar, the notes falling like lemon and oleander flowers into the dark, cold water.

Half a click down in the huge lake — really a freshwater inland sea — glacial ice still lingered, surviving into the heat of an earth warmer than it had been since the noontime of the dinosaurs. Shrieking happily, goosepimpled swimmers were leaping into the water from the floating docks of lakeside villas. Further on, strings of Japanese lanterns illuminated teahouses and casinos and sliderrinks where the children of grandees cavorted on expensive cushions of air.

Back in the hills, spotlights illuminated palaces. Bijou villas lined the shores, and on the veranda of one of the smaller ones Stef and Dzhun idled, wearing light evening robes and not much else. Dzhun kept returning to Stef's account of the raid, trying to get the story straight.

"So these terrorists — did you shoot them?"

"Didn't have to. I've seldom felt like such a fool in my life."

Stef gestured lazily, and Dzhun disturbed herself long enough to pour champagne. The grapes of Siberia were justly famous, the flavor supposedly improved by the low background radiation.

"The terrorists weren't dangerous?"

"Pair of dumb kids. The boy wearing his funny cross and the girl with the same symbol tattooed on her hand, if you can believe that. The Darksider smashed the door in and let out a roar and they both fainted dead away. Then I jumped in yelling and the thuggi followed, and suddenly the four of us were standing around waving weapons at two unconscious children. Ridiculous scene.

"I almost puked when I had to hand them over to the polizi. Not that

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there was anything else I could do, with the thuggi and the Darksider there. I was sure Kathmann would tear them limb from limb, but Yama says they woke up spilling their guts. The polizi have got 'em locked up, of course, but Security got everything they wanted in the first three minutes."

"Dyeva."

"Absolutely. Iris and Ananda said she'd come in by the Luna shuttle on such and such a day. That was enough. Kathmann called Yama. Yama has shuttle data at his fingertips, there were only four females of the right age on that one, and they all checked out except Akhmatova Maria from a planet called Ganesh, which is, just like it was supposed to be, in the Lion Sector. *She* stepped off the shuttle and vanished.

"So now they got her hologram, plus retinographs, voiceprints, DNA, all that stuff they take when you get a passport. The kids have positively identified her. Dyeva's been made, for whatever good it may do us.

"It was an eventful day. The kids had met Dyeva at a villa outside town, so the polizi descended on that and bagged the owner. He went straight to the Chamber and promptly gave them the name of another member of the cell, a woman who has so far evaded capture. A demand for information went out to Ganesh at maximum power and with the most awful threats that Yama could think of on the spur of the moment.

"He'd just laid all this information on Oleary's desk when another call comes in from Earth Central. Kathmann's got the wormholer. Gadget takes a hell of a lot of juice, so his mashini were watching the Ulanor power grid for unusual current surges. Well, a surge of the right size occurred, and Kathmann arrived at the meter with half a dozen Darksiders to find the wormholer standing all by itself in a deserted warehouse in the northwest quadrant."

Dzhun was frowning. "Then that means — "

"You and I may vanish at any moment," Stef grinned. "Dyeva's presumably in the 21st century trying to prevent the Time of Troubles. I wish her luck. How's she going to do it?"

"And we're here."

"And we're here, relaxing, courtesy of the payoff to Yang. My success in cracking Crux convinced Yama that I'm the guy to stop Dyeva. He offered me a hundred thousand to go after her. I laughed in his face."

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"Then who'll do the job?"

"Some thuggi from Earth Central who're under military discipline and can't say no."

"And what'll happen to her?"

"In the 21st century? Probably get killed by the surface traffic. Or catch a fatal disease. Or get lost in the crowds. I wouldn't trust Kathmann's idiots to find their peckers when they need to piss. Dyeva's safe enough from them."

Later, he and Dzhun wandered up the shingled beach to a waterside inn that served caviar and Peking duck and other edibles. People of the upper and underworld were crowded together at small tables, eating and drinking. Blue clouds of kif drifted from open censers over the crowd, relaxing everybody.

Dzhun, who had an indelicate appetite, was just piling into her dessert when the haunting notes of a synthesizer drifted like pollen across vast, cool Lake Bai. A band floated up in an open hovercar, and a *sisi* with a piercingly sweet voice performed a popular air, "This Dewdrop World," whose simple theme was eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die. The crowd loved it; silver half-khans and even a few gold khans showered the car. Whenever a coin fell in the water, a musician would jump in after it like a frog and have to be fished out by his friends.

It was a fine end to the evening. When Stef and Dzhun left the restaurant the air had the lingering chill of spring and the scent of lemon groves that were blossoming in the hills. Dzhun pulled Stef's arm like a scarf around her neck and started to sing the song again. He leaned over her, hugged her close. It was at moments like this that he almost envied people who were foolish enough to fall in love.

"I love that song," she said. "It's so nice to be sad. Sadness goes with joy like plums with duck."

Didn't statements like that mean that she was, after all, a bit more than just a whore? Stef hugged her tighter, breathing in her offworld perfume with the chilly scent of the lemon groves.

They had an amorous night and spent next morning lolling on the deck with their usual strong green tea. They were supposed to start back to the city today and Dzhun was looking abstracted.

"Can't wait to get back and go to work?" Stef smiled.

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"Stef...there's something I have to tell you."

"What?"

"My senator wants to set me up in a little house in Karakorum. He's jealous, and it'll be the end for you and me."

That produced silence. Stef cleared his throat, drank tea.

"Ah. So this trip was a kissoff."

"It doesn't have to be."

"Meaning?"

Dzhun said, eyes cast down, "I'd rather live with you. We don't have to marry."

"No," said Stef.

Dzhun sat down, still not looking at him.

"I thought you'd say that. I've never bothered you with my life story because I thought you'd get bored and angry. But let me tell you just a little. My family needed money, so they sold me into the District when I was nine. The owner rented me to one of his customers. The night he raped me, I almost bled to death.

"By the time I was twelve I was a registered whore, a member of the guild. It took me three more years to pay off my debts because in the District the houses charge you for everything, heat, water, towels, mediscanning, almost for the air you breathe. But I was beautiful and earning good money and I was out of debt by the time I was sixteen. Now I'm almost eighteen and I'm sick of it all. I don't want to be a *robotchi* anymore.

"I hear people talk about going to the stars and I've never been out of Ulanor. I can barely read and write and if Selina hadn't taught me some arithmetic so they couldn't cheat me, I wouldn't be able to add two and two. I don't know anything, all I do is live from night to night — up at sixteen, to bed at eight. I've had dozens of diseases — sida six times — and the last time it took me a whole month to recover. The house doctor says my immune system's collapsing, whatever that means.

"I've got to get out of the life, Stef. I want to live with you, but if you don't want me I'm going with my senator. He has some funny tastes and three wives and he's old, but he's also kind-hearted and rich, and that's enough."

She stopped, still looking down at the floor. Stef was staring at Dzhun

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and clenching his fists. He felt as if a favorite dog had just bitten him. Twice, in fact — once by threatening to leave him, and once by demanding a commitment from him.

"I don't want anything fancy," Dzhun went on. "I want to live in a house with a garden. I want to get up in the morning and go to bed at night. I want to go to school before I'm too old and learn something about the world. I can see you're angry with me. Well, so be it. If you're too angry to pay my way back to the city, well screw you. I'll get the shuttle by myself."

She stood up and walked somewhat unsteadily into the house, taking by habit the little mincing steps they taught the girls — and the boys as well — in Radiant Love House.

Half an hour later she came back out, dressed for the road. Stef was leaning on the railing, looking down into deep and black Lake Bai.

Stef said, "I'm poor. I'm a loner. I'm a kif head."

"So you can't afford me, don't want me, and don't need me because kif's better. Right? So, goodbye."

"Can you fend off your senator for a while?"

"Not forever. He can buy what he wants, and I don't want to lose him."

"I guess I could set up housekeeping with a hundred thousand," Stef muttered. "But maybe I can bargain for more."

Dzhun collapsed rather than sat down and drew the longest breath of her life. She put her hands over her face as if she was weeping, though in fact she had stopped crying many years before and her face was hot and dry. Her mind was running on many things, but chiefly on her friend Selina's brainstorm, the wonderful invention of the senator, who, of course, did not really exist.

"So you'll do it," said Yama.

"For a million khans. Paid in advance. I want something to leave to my heirs in the event I don't come back."

"That's a bunch of fucking money."

"There's one more thing I want. Get those two kids I captured turned loose. Otherwise Kathmann will sooner or later cut their heads off on general principles."

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Yama frowned. "He'll never turn them loose. They're young and the girl's beautiful, so he'll want to mutilate them. In my opinion, he's saving them for something special. That's the way Kathmann is — he's a fucking sadist, as you of all people ought to know."

"Try anyway."

"It's hopeless. But if I can save them I will."

When Stef had gone, Yama set out to sell his prize agent to the *fromazhi*. He expected trouble with Kathmann but none developed; the chief of Earth Security was assembling an assassination team to kill Dyeva and viewed Stef's mission as a chance to test the wormholer. Ugaitish, Admiral Hrka, and Xian were ready to try anything and put their chops on the proposal without a murmur. It was Yama's own boss, Oleary, who objected because of the cost.

"Why don't you go yourself?" he demanded. "It'd be cheaper."

"Sir, I'll go if you say to. But I got a wife and four kids."

"That's two more than the ecolaws allow."

"I got an exemption."

Oleary stared at Stef's file, frowning.

"What's wrong with this guy? I don't trust him. Why did he have to leave the service in the first place?"

"Sir, he's a great agent. Brave, quick, adaptable. But he's got a soft spot in his head. He's sentimental. You can't be a cop and be sentimental. A long time ago he helped a woman thief who was headed for the White Chamber to escape. Well, I found out about it, so I did my duty and turned Steffens in."

Oleary kept on frowning.

"If he's sentimental about women, what about when he has to kill, what's her name, Dyeva?"

"Sir, she's different. She's threatening his whole world, including this little tart he seems to be in love with."

"Oh, well," said Oleary, shrugging. "Send him, I guess. Can't hurt. But take the money back if he doesn't succeed. How could I justify a budget item like that for a failure?"

"You go tomorrow," said Yama. "Here's some stuff to study tonight."

Stef took the packet of copy, caught an official hovercar, and flew

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straight to Radiant Love House. The long farewell that followed left Stef weeping, and Dzhun — once the door had closed behind him — smiling at prospects that seemed equally bright whether he survived his mission or not.

Back home, he settled down on the balcony to study the three items that Yama had provided him: a hologram of Dyeva, a summary of her life on Ganesh, and a map of ancient Moscow. The map got little more than a glance; he needed to be in situ to use it. Dyeva's hologram was another matter. Stef studied it as closely as if she and not Dzhun was his lover, imprinting on his mind Dyeva's round Tartar face, high cheekbones and unreadable eyes.

Then he read her biography. To his surprise, the hardcopy with its STATE SECRET/BEHEADER stamp had been written by Professor Yang. Liking the taste of polizi money, he'd gone to work for Yama as a volunteer agent, and his first task had been writing up and annotating Dyeva's life story.

Settlers of the Shiva system had been led by a devout Hindu who had hoped to establish a refuge for members of all the old faiths — Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Buddhists as well as his own people — where, far from corruption and unbelief, peace and justice and the worship of God could reign for all time.

"The actual results of this noble experiment," wrote Yang, "were not without irony." In the process of settling the system, three intelligent species had been destroyed, and among the humans religious wars and bitter sectarian disputes had constituted much of the system's subsequent history.

Akhmatova Maria was born to a devout family on the third planet, Ganesh. They maintained Christian belief according to the Russian Orthodox rite and hated both their neighbors of other faiths and the depraved and godless civilization of other planets. In time she lost her own faith in God but adopted in its place the religion of humanity. Her private life remained austere; she had neither male nor female lovers, and the name she took in the movement which she helped to found, Dyeva, meant virgin in Russian, her native dialect.

She was attending the local academy when news of the technical advances which allowed invention of the wormholer gave her the great project of her life. She was one of a group of people loosely connected with

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the academy who formed a scheme to undo the Time of Troubles by returning to the past. Some members of her group transferred to the University of the Universe in Ulanor, where they made converts to their views and laid plans to build — later on, learning that one had already been built, to steal — a wormholer.

Then came a part of the account that Yama had marked in red. Dyeva's theory that the Troubles could be prevented rested upon a verbal tradition among the Russian Christians of Ganesh: that a man named Razruzhenye, the defense minister of ancient Russia when the troubles began, ordered the first thermo/bio strike upon China and that this attack launched the Time of Troubles. Killing this one individual might well prevent the war and undo the whole course of disasters that followed.

"So," muttered Stef. It seemed a little strange to him that Dyeva, who believed in the absolute value of life, was returning to the past to kill someone. But Yang in a footnote pointed out that such things had happened many times in the past: people who believed in freedom imprisoned freedom's enemies; those who believed in life murdered anybody who seemed to threaten it.

His study finished, Stef ate a little, then fell into bed. He woke when his mashina chimed and managed to stumble through a bath. Then he confronted a large box of ridiculous clothing that had been prepared according to Professor Yang's designs, based on what men wore in the mosaics of the Moscow subway.

At seven-seventy-five a government hovercar picked Stef off the roof and flew him to a neighborhood that he knew only too well, a cluster of huge anonymous buildings with vaguely menacing forms. They descended past the ziggurat Palace of Justice and the Central Lockup in whose subterranean rooms he had tasted the joys of interrogation.

This time, however, the huge pentagonal block of Earth Central was the goal. The hovercar descended through a well in the central courtyard that wits called the Navel of the Earth. Yama met Stef as he emerged in a sunless court of black hexagonal stone blocks and led him down one narrow blank corridor after another, past huge stinking Darksiders armed with impact weapons, into a vaulted underground room with a gleaming contraption standing in the center of the floor among a jungle of thick gray cables.

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"So that's it," said Stef, interested by his own lack of interest. At the center of the wormholer was a two-meter cube with a round opening in one side, whose purpose he could easily guess.

Blue-coated techs helped him into a heavy coat with wide lapels and big pockets, slipped an impact pistol into the right-hand coat pocket, and slid a black powerpack with a small control box into the left. Somebody stuck a chilly metal button into his left ear.

"Pay attention to the control," said Yama. "Take it in your hand. Now. Red button: job's done, bring me home. *Oké*? White button: I need help, send backup now. Black button: hold onto your ass, Dyeva's succeeded and your world is finished. The powerpack feeds a little tiny built-in mag space transponder that emits a kind of cosmic squeak for one microsecond. The signal crosses time exactly the way it crosses space, don't ask me why. That's what we'll be listening for. Then we have to pull you back, send help, or — "

"Grab your butts. I see. But that also means you could just cut me off, leave me there, save yourselves a million."

"Yeah, we could, but we won't. Hell with that, I really mean *I* won't. Not," he smiled, "for a measly million that isn't even my money."

They stared at each other until Stef managed a weak grin.

"That's good enough. Any problems?"

"Yes," said Stef, "lots. I don't speak Russian. I've got no goddamn idea how to find Dyeva even if I land in Moscow at the right time. I — "

Yama took Stef's arm and began to walk him toward the wormholer.

"Don't worry about the language. That thing in your ear will translate for you. And don't worry about the time. A register inside the machine recorded the day Dyeva chose, the 331st day of 2091. So we're sending you to that same date in hopes she's close to the point of exit. If she's not, you'll have to find her."

"How?"

"Come on, Stef. I sold the others on you because of your adaptability. This whole world you're going into vanished in a cloud of dust. How much can anybody know about it? There's just no way to be systematic."

They stopped beside the huge glittering gadget.

"I really envy you," said Yama in a choked voice. "This is the most

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crucial moment in human history. You're the plumed knight of our world, like Yoshitsune, like Saladin, like Richard the Lion-Hearted."

Yama embaced him. "Take care, my old friend, and *kill that fucking virgin.*"

An instant later the techs had helped Stef into the wormholer and closed the heavy door, which looked like a nine-petal steel chrysanthemum. Yama stepped back, wiping his eyes. Kathmann had now arrived to observe the action and Yama joined him.

"Well, that's one less friend I got," said Yama. "This job of mine is hell. How are the preparations going for your assassination team?"

"As fast as possible. Of course they're the ones who'll really do the job."

"There's a chance that Steffens might pull it off alone."

"Yeah," said Kathmann, "and there's a chance I might be the next Solar System Controller. *Svidanye,*" he added, "see you later. Some more members of Crux have been arrested and I got work to do in the Chamber."

IN THE WORMHOLER, seated as he had been instructed, knees drawn up, chin down, arms around his shins, sweltering in the heavy coat, feeling the pistol grate against his ribs, Stef tried to imagine Dzhun's face, but found that it, like everything else, was inadequate to explain to him why he was where he was. The excitement he'd felt earlier was gone, replaced by mere dread. He could only suppose that his entire life had been leading up to one moment of supreme folly, and this was it.

Then a great violet-white light flashed through him, he felt an instant of supernatural cold, and he was sitting on a gritty sidewalk against a damp stuccoed wall.

He raised his face. The day was overcast, and a restless throng of thick-bodied people wrapped up against the autumn chill hurried past, not one of them paying him the slightest heed.

He looked higher. Behind the solid walls of elderly, three-story buildings with flaking plaster and paint he saw high polished towers of what looked like mirror duroplast. Immense crimson letters hovered just below the lowest layer of murk.

Since Alspeke was written mostly in cyrillic letters, he had no trouble

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reading *Moskovskaya Fondovaya Birzha*, and when he murmured it aloud a soft atonal voice in his ear translated: Moscow Stock Exchange. Below the Stock Exchange sign was a huge blue banner saying "1991-2091."

Slowly he got to his feet, staggered, caught himself against the wall. A pretty young woman paused, stared at him, then drew a pale furry hood around her face and hurried on.

A couple of teenagers stopped also, looked at him and grinned. They squawked to each other in seabirds' voices.

"What's this asshole dressed up for?"

"Must think he's Stalin or something. Hey, asshole — where'd you get that coat?"

A stout woman stopped suddenly and shook her fist at the kids.

"You leave that man alone! Can't you see he's crazy? He's got troubles enough without you hooligans pestering him."

A little man in a checkered coat stopped and joined her.

"Show some respect!" he shouted at the kids.

"What, for a guy dressed up like Stalin, for Christ's sake? Hey you," said a teenager to Stef. "You going to a party?"

Unfortunately, the translator didn't answer questions, and Stef just stared at him.

"My God, he's deaf and dumb, and you're harassing him," said the woman in scandalized tones.

By now a little crowd had gathered. Everybody had an opinion. It was the adults against the teenagers.

"You little bastards got no respect for anybody!"

"Not for you, Grandaddy."

"Call me Grandaddy? Yes, I've got grandchildren, but thank God they're nothing like you, you little pimp."

In the confusion, Stef managed to slip away, leaving them arguing behind him. In an alleyway he unbuttoned the coat and stared down at the tunic and coarse trousers jammed into boots. The clothes were *nothing* like what people were wearing on the street. Already the stiff, kneehigh boots of faux leather were beginning to chafe his toes, and he hadn't walked more than a hundred meters.

Cursing Yang, he tried to decide what to do. While he pondered, he worked his way from alleyway to alleyway until he suddenly spotted,

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among the hundreds of small shops lining the street — Boris Yeltsin Street — a shop with a sign that said *Kostyumi.* He didn't need the translator for that.

Thirty minutes later, Stef emerged from the costume shop wearing acceptable clothes, short soft boots, baggy trousers, a faux astrakhan hat, a long warm padded jacket. In his pockets were thirty ten-ruble notes, the difference between the value of the handsome and practically new theatrical garb he'd sold the shop's owner and that of the second-hand, ill-fitting stuff he'd bought from him.

He slipped into the crowd, which was denser than the center of Ulanor on Great Genghis Day. The street traffic was noisy and thick, everybody driving headlong as if their odd, smelly cars were assaulting a position. Above, the air traffic was thin, almost absent — a few primitive rotary-wing machines with shapes so bizarre that Stef thought at first that they were some sort of giant insect life. Jet trails streaked far above, making him wonder if airpackets already flew from Luna.

Between street and sky, strung on cables, hundreds of blue banners fluttered, all saying 1991-2091, and sometimes "100 Years of the Democratic Republic," whatever that meant. He could see no mention of Tsar Stalin the Good.

His next stop was in front of a huge window filled with flickering mashini. Stef was surprised to see that the images made by the boxes were three-dimensional — he had expected something less advanced — though the technology was crude, merely a rough illusion created on a flat screen. His eyes roved past a ballet and half a dozen sports programs. Russian *futbol* teams had dominated world play in the season just past, but what would the hockey season bring forth? Young people dashed around on grass or ice while the announcer talked.

Nobody at all seemed to be thinking about the danger of universal destruction. Stef shook his head, amazed at the ordinariness of this world, so close to its end. He moved along, jostling against these people who would soon be dust and ashes, astonished at their solidity and their obvious confidence that they would exist for a long time to come.

A single screen was tuned to a news program called *Vremya* and he stopped to watch it. A young woman wearing a fantastic pile of yellow hair spoke of the Russian-led international team now hard at work establish-

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ing the Martian colony and the problems it was facing. People on Mars, needing to communicate despite a babel of tongues, were developing a jargon all their own; the American members of the colony called it All-Speak. It was mostly Russian and English, with a flavoring of words from twenty other languages.

Meanwhile a new condominium development on Luna marked the transformation of that spartan base, barely seventy years old, into a genuine city, the first on another world. Space had never looked better; Russia's own program, after a long eclipse, again led the world. Here on Earth things were not so encouraging. There were new outbreaks of Blue Nile hemorrhagic fever. The Nine-Years' War continued in the Rocky Mountains; the weak U.S. central government seemed unable to conquer the rebels, and United Nations peacekeepers had again been massacred in Montana.

But the big worry was that border tensions continued to mount in Mongolia, where Chinese forces had occupied Ulan Bator. The name caused Stef to press his nose against the glass. He had heard enough of Yang's lecture to know that Ulan Bator was the origin of the name Ulanor, even though the city the announcer was talking about was now — now? — nothing more than a mound on the green forested banks of the River Tuul.

According to Yang, a few survivors of the Troubles had trekked northward, bringing the name with them and applying it to a cluster of yurts in an endless snowstorm. Later, because it had low background radiation, the place had become the site of the Worldcity — a strange fate for a Mongol encampment that had survived the Two Year Winter for no better reason than the sheer unkillable toughness of its people and an endless supply of frozen yak meat, which they had softened by sleeping on it and eaten raw for lack of firewood.

Another name caught Stef's attention. "Defense Minister Razumovsky has declared that Russia, together with its European and American allies, will stand firm against further aggression by the Imperial People's Republic of China."

Defense Minister Razumovsky? That wasn't the word he had learned, the name of the man Dyeva was supposed to kill. It was another Raz word, Raz, raz — *Razruzhenye.*

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He must have said the word aloud without meaning to, for his translator murmured, "Destruction."

Stef nodded. Sure. In the folk memory, Minister Razumovsky became Minister Razruzhenye, Minister Destruction. The name was wrong, but the tradition might still be correct.

Razumovsky suddenly appeared in a clip. He had a wide, flat face like a frog someone had stepped on. He seemed to talk with his right fist as much as his mouth, pounding on a podium while he spoke of Russia's sacred borders and of China's presumption, now that it had conquered Korea and Japan, that all East Asia belonged to the Dragon Republic.

"They'll find out different if they mess with us!" Razumovsky bawled, and loud cheering broke out among a crowd seated in something called the Duma. "They think they can threaten us with their rockets, but our Automated Space Defense System is the most advanced in the world. I spit upon their threats!" More cheering.

Then a weighty, white-maned man came on, identified as President Rostoff. His message was of conciliation and peace. "As the leader of the Western Alliance, Russia bears a grave responsibility to act with all due caution. Our guard is up, but we extend as well the hand of friendship to our Chinese brothers and sisters."

Stef smiled; across the centuries, he recognized without difficulty the ancient game of good cop-bad cop. He moved on, meditating on a final line from the announcer: that the debate on the Mongolian situation would continue in the Duma tonight, and that the President and the cabinet would again be present. Was that why Dyeva had picked this particular day to return to the past?

He walked down a gentle declivity where the street widened into an avenue called Great Polyanka and rose to the marble pylons of a new gleaming bridge. Beyond a small river he saw red walls, gold onion domes, palaces of white stone — the Kremlin.

Pleasure boats with glass roofs slid lazily along the river, which was divided here by a long island. In the boats Stef could see brightly dressed people dancing. Then the crowd swept him onto the other bank, past the Aleksandrovsky Gardens and up a gentle rise. Here the throng divided; most people passed on, but some joined a long queue that had formed at a brick gatehouse.

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Stef continued with the majority along the autumnal garden and the crenellated wall into Red Square. He stared like any tourist at a cathedral like a kif-head's dream and then, feeling tired and hungry, crossed the square and drifted into the archways of a huge building that filled the far side, a market of some sort crowded with shops and loudly bargaining people. At a stall that sold writing paper, Stef bought a small notebook, an envelope, and an object he had never seen before — a pen that emitted ink.

The building held eating places, too. Hungrily, Stef found himself a place at a small table in one of them and ordered *shchi* without knowing what cabbage was. Soon a bowl of hot greenish soup lay steaming before him, along with a sliced onion and a chunk of dense and delicious brown bread and sweet butter. It was the first time he'd ever tasted butter from a cow, since all the Earth's cattle had died in the Troubles. It had a subtle, complex flavor and an unctuous texture quite different from the manufactured stuff he knew.

He devoured it all, licked his fingers as the other diners were doing, and paid with a few of his rubles. Then, still sitting at the table, he laboriously wrote a few lines, tore out the page, and sealed it in an envelope which he addressed to Xian in care of Yama. He left the eating place smiling grimly; in case something went wrong, this note was another legacy he hoped to leave behind him.

He returned to Red Square to find that in his absence it had become almost unbearably beautiful. A light autumn snow had begun to fall, streetlights were coming on, and the bizarre cathedral of St. Basil floated in its own illumination, more than ever a dream.

Shadows, light and snow turned everything to magic. Strolling past were young people with faces as white and pink as dawn clouds, and among them stout men in astrakahns and elegant women in faux ermine. Old women were selling apples that could have been plucked from their own cheeks.

A little band began to play somewhere as Stef slowly retraced his steps, out of the square and up to a floodlit gate in the Kremlin wall. People were streaming in, all talking excitedly, and Stef followed.

Inside, he moved with difficulty through the throng gathering at a big, anonymous new building with the words DUMA OF THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE in gold letters above the doors. Guards in hats of faux fur were

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trying to keep a roadway open here, pushing people back but, to Stef's surprise, using no whips. Considering what he had always heard about the Tsars, the mildness of this government was astonishing. He circled the crowd, his mind now centered on Dyeva's hologram, searching faces of which there seemed no end, countless faces, all different, none hers.

Away from the Duma the Kremlin grounds were more open. In the last light, huge rooks wearing gray patches on their wings like shawls flew from one bare tree to another, cawing their complaints about the human invasion. Stef wandered into a small church like a glittering lacquered box. Gold-haloed saints ascended every wall and hung suspended in the red depths of the ceiling; ghostly notes of song showered down, although he could see nobody singing.

People knelt, prayed or simply stood and looked on. An old woman rose, crossed herself, and jostled Stef on her way out. Another and younger woman wearing a fur hat and a long coat rose and turned to go. Either Dyeva or her twin sister passed so close to Stef that he could have touched her.

AFTER A STUNNED instant of surprise he followed, out into the dry fresh-falling snow, the lights and shadows of dusk. The rooks had settled into their nests. She didn't walk, she strode, eyes straight ahead. He followed her along a winding path, keeping one or two people between them. He was looking for a place to kill her, a dark corner, a moment of privacy.

Then he realized that he didn't need privacy. Left hand on the red button of the transponder, he gripped his weapon with his right, raising the barrel a little in his coat pocket. He would kill her in the open and escape where nobody could follow. He only had to make absolutely sure that this was his quarry. He stepped off the path, the dry snow crunched under his boots, he hastened, he was directly behind her.

She had stopped to watch a wedding party ending a day's celebration here in the Kremlin at dusk. Holding wine glasses were a pretty girl in voluminous white, her new husband in an uncomfortable-looking suit of black, and half a dozen friends. One of the friends stepped forward with a bottle of bubbling wine and filled their glasses. Everyone was laughing.

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They had picked up a street musician someplace, an old man with a primitive instrument of some sort that he crushed and stretched between his hands. He played wheezy music and the young people toasted the couple while onlookers clapped, laughed and wept.

"Dyeva," said Stef and she turned her head and looked at him.

Unquestionably it was the Tartar face he knew so well, with the high cheekbones and the angled eyes. Her face didn't change, yet she knew instantly why he had come. Instead of pleading for her life, she said in Alspeke, in a low, urgent voice:

"Look at them! Look at them! Look at this world. Can you really let it destroy itself to save what we have — tyrants, fools, Darksiders, the White Chamber? These people are alive, they're free, they deserve to have a future. Whoever you are, take just one second before you kill me. Think about it!"

And for a lengthening instant Stef did. In fact, he had been thinking about it secretly for hours. To be here, now, seeing these people, this world — it wasn't theory anymore. Uncounted millions lived and breathed and wanted to keep on doing so. His own world seemed remote and for the moment unbelievable — the broken drains and babaku smells of Golden Horde Street, his dirty apartment and the kif pipe, Yama and his stinking guardian, his long day in the White Chamber, Lake Bai and the singsongers on the boat, the synthesizer and the *sisi* warbling the melody "This Dewdrop World."

For that instant he could have joined Crux himself. Then he thought of Dzhun and he was paralyzed by indecision. As he hesitated, Dyeva turned to face him squarely and he heard the soft sound *Phut!* as she shot him through her coat.

He felt — not pain, but an incredible, crushing pressure in his midsection. His upper body flew backward, almost separated from the rest of him and the back of his head struck the cold hard snowy ground. A last mechanical contraction of his right hand fired his pistol, sent the bullet up, up into the darkening overcast like a tiny missile. His left squeezed the red button, meaning: my job is finished, I have succeeded. Bring me home.

Dyeva turned and hastened away, boots squeaking in the fresh snow. People were gawking at the wedding party and almost a minute passed

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before she heard, by now far behind her, a single scream. She would never know that the reason was not only the sight of a dead man lying horribly mutilated in the snow, but the fact that, even as someone spotted him, he disappeared, evaporated into the gathering darkness. Yama had kept his word.

She plunged into the crowd before the Duma building, her mind running now on the scheduled arrival of the President and his cabinet for a debate on the Mongolian situation. Running also on the fact that such schedules were almost never kept. Running on the fact that she still had fifteen bullets, and that any one would be enough. Running on the importance of stopping this Minister Destruction that she had been hearing people on Ganesh curse since her childhood — the man who had given the order that ended their world.

No, she didn't believe in God any longer. But she had had to try once more to recapture her faith in the Cathedral of the Annunciation. Who could have imagined that she'd ever have a chance to pray there, in a building long since vaporized and its atoms embedded deep in the Kremlin Shield?

Well, the experiment had failed; she could not recapture her own faith, but she would insure that other people kept theirs. She would sacrifice herself as Christ had for the sins of the world. There was no heaven at the end of it, but this was how she wanted to die.

She squeezed herself through the crowd, murmuring apologies in her strangely accented Russian, a kind of Russian that wouldn't be invented, ever, if she could manage it. She wondered if her parents would still be born and meet and have a child and call it Maria. No, too unlikely; if they lived at all, they would meet other people and marry them. Everything would be different. She felt a strange, dark satisfaction in thinking that she would not merely die here in the Kremlin; in some sense, she would never have existed at all.

She had reached the front of the crowd, and stood pressed behind a bulky policeman. Fortunately, when the first gleaming limousine turned in through the Gate of the Savior and slid to a stop before the Duma, the policeman moved a little to get a good view of the notables. On the far side of the car, President Rostoff emerged and turned to wave at the crowd. On this side, a young and apparently nervous security man emerged and

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glanced briefly at Dyeva's face. Other security men appeared too, jumping from cars, stepping briskly through the snow.

Rostoff, instead of going inside, crossed behind his own car and came to the crowd, reaching out to shake hands. People were cheering, arms reaching out and waving like limbs at the edge of a forest in a windstorm. From a second limousine, Razumovsky approached, also smiling, but keeping a few steps back to avoid upstaging the President. Dyeva shifted the pistol in the deep pocket of her coat and prepared to fire.

Then a gaggle of odd-looking people ran up, carrying primitive cameras of some sort. A sudden spotlight flashed on the crowd and Dyeva was blinded by the light. The long barrel of the impact pistol slipped through the hole in her coat made by her last shot. Shielding her eyes, she aimed as well as she could at Razumovsky. The little sound *Phut!* vanished in the roar of the crowd.

But the young security man had spotted the gleam of metal, and without the slightest hesitation he shoved the President the wrong way, into the path of the exploding bullet. Suddenly half of Rostoff's large body was gone, shredded.

Unaware of the disaster, the security man raised his own right hand, which was holding the newest M91K police automatic, 7.8 mm and loaded with superteflon hollowpoints. The first of six bullets hit Dyeva. They were not impact ammo, but they were sufficient.

She toppled backward, firing a last round that skated upward and blew a meter-wide hole in the marble facing of the new Duma building. The chips were still flying as she hit the snow, feeling nothing but a strange lightness as if she had become a woman of air that would shortly disperse. She looked up into the faces of the security man and Minister Razumovsky as the two bent over her.

But you're supposed to be dead, she thought. And died.

Razumovsky glared down at her Tartar face.

"The goddamn Chinese did this!" he roared, and turned away.

Half a dozen people in the crowd were down, bleeding and crying for help, because the young security man and the others who had rushed to help him had managed to hit not only Dyeva but everyone near her as well. Razumovsky ignored all that, the screams, the confusion. Roughly he shook off the hands trying to drag him this way or that way to safety. Alone

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of them all, he knew exactly what he wanted to do.

He plunged into the President's armored limousine and shouted to the driver, "Get me out of here!"

While the driver, weeping and blinded by tears and lights, tried to find the gate, tried to force a way through the crowd without killing anybody else, Razumovsky took a key from around his neck and drove it into a lock in the back of the front seat. A small steel door fell open and he pulled out a red telephone.

"Razumovsky here!" he roared. "Chinese agents have wounded the President! I relay to you his exact words: 'We are at war! You will launch now!' Codeword: Ivan the Terrible."

He sank back on the upholstery and passed a shaking hand over his squashed-frog face. At least in dying the *glupetz* Rostoff had inadvertently chosen the right policy — for a change. Had he lived, who could tell what might have happened?

"Goddamn," said Oleary. "I still can't believe he managed it, all alone like that."

The Secret Committee had assembled to hear Yama's final report on Stef's mission to the past. Xian, Ugaitish, Hrka, Oleary — they were all there but Kathmann. Except for Xian — who already knew the story — the *fromazhi* were leaning breathlessly over the gilt Martian table, listening to the story of how their world had been saved.

"Well, here's the evidence," said Yama. "First, we recover Stef's body, dead, obviously shot by a modern weapon, *oké*? His own gun has been fired once. The world we live in does not vanish, but on the contrary looks as solid as ever, at least to me. Just to eliminate any doubts about what happened, we use the wormholer one more time. We pull back from Moscow, 360th day of 2091, an air sample which is full of intensely radioactive dust and ice particles.

"Now I ask you, Honored Grandees. What can we conclude, except that Stef and Dyeva killed each other, that with his last gasp, so to speak, he signaled us to recover him because his job was done, and that the Time of Troubles proceeded to happen on schedule?"

Xian turned to Yang, standing in the shadows, deference in every line of his big, weak body. "What do you think, Honored Professor?"

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"I agree. The evidence is absolutely irrefutable, and I have spent my whole life evaluating evidence."

"Well, I guess we have to accept it," fretted Oleary. He still hoped to take back Stef's million, but he could see that it would be difficult now.

"I am obliged to add," Yama continued, "that a sealed envelope was found on Steffen's body containing a note to Solar System Controller Xian."

He glanced at her and she nodded.

"It reads as follows," said Yama, spreading a copy on the arm of the *shozit*.

> Facing death, Dyeva states that Kathmann cooperated in the theft of the wormholer. He expected to win promotion by crushing the conspiracy afterward, but Crux was too clever for him. Ever since, he has been desperately trying to wipe out those few who know of his treason.
>
> Steffens Aleksandr

The *fromazhi* drew a deep collective breath.

"Is it possible?" demanded Ugaitish. "The head of Earth Security? What could he hope to gain from assisting a conspiracy, then destroying it?"

"He told me once," said Yama, who had been waiting for this moment for many years, "that he dreamed of being Solar System Controller."

"Honored grandees," said Xian, "you must know that at first I, too, found this accusation hard to believe. But the evidence is great. The paper, ink and handwriting prove that Steffens wrote this note. In his own defense, Kathmann made the claim that Steffens was seeking revenge because he had been tortured. But Kathmann's own record of Steffens's interrogation certifies that the questioning was 'exceptionally gentle.' This was a troubling contradiction.

"We all know that Kathmann, in spite of his many virtues, was too zealous, too ambitious. I ordered him to bring me the scientist who stole the wormholer for questioning. The man had been beheaded. That seemed an extremely suspicious circumstance to me. Was Kathmann trying to ensure his silence? All the builders of the wormholer were also dead. I questioned the only two Crux prisoners who were still alive, but they were mere children and knew nothing — which was probably why they had kept their heads.

"In the end, to resolve the matter I ordered Kathmann into the White

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Chamber. With the needles in his spine, he made a full confession. Every statement made by Steffens in this note is true. Kathmann knew too many state secrets to be permitted to live, and so I had him beheaded."

She looked around at the others, as if waiting for a challenge. Yama smiled a little. Admiral Hrka remarked that he had never liked the fellow. Aside from that, Kathmann's harsh fate produced no comment whatever.

"Is there any other business, then?" asked Xian, preparing to end the meeting.

Yang had been waiting for this moment to step forward from the shadows. "Now that Crux is finished, Honored Grandees," he said smoothly, "I would suggest going public with the story and making Steffens a hero.

"The heroes we honor all lived a long time ago; they are almost mythic figures — indeed, some of them, like the Yellow Emperor, are entirely myths. But here we have a hero of today, one that people can identify with, one who brings the glory and splendor of the present world order home to the common man. It's true, of course," he added, "that certain aspects of Steffens's life will have to be edited for public consumption. But the same could be said of any other hero of history."

"Superb," cried Xian at once, ending any argument before it began. Raising a tiny, thin hand that looked with its many rings like a jeweled spider, she declared: "Steffens will be buried with full honors. Someone with talent will write his biography and Yang will sign it. Scenes from his life will be enacted on every mashina. A great tomb will be built — "

"Honored Solar System Controller," muttered Yama, "we've already cremated the body and disposed of the ashes."

"What difference does that make? Do you suppose Genghis Khan sleeps in what we call his grave? Now, *bistra, bistra!* — quick, quick! Get a move on. Remember that heroes are made, not born."

Professor Yang, smiling over the adoption of his idea, left the cabinet room with Yama.

"In some ways," he remarked, "the most intriguing supposition is that the world we live in has *always* been the consequence of the Crux conspiracy and its outcome. Wouldn't it be interesting, Honored Colonel, if time is, so to speak, absolutely relative — if this episode has been

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embedded in the past ever since 2091, and all our world is the long-term result of what, from our point of view, has only just happened?"

Yama, hurrying to carry out Xian's order, paused long enough to stare at Yang.

"What complete nonsense," he growled.

Pending appointment of a replacement for Kathmann, Yama was combining Earth Central duties with his own. Most of his day was taken up with Stef in one way or another. Yama launched the process of glorification, then carried out a more personal duty: as he'd once promised Stef, he ordered the release of Iris and Ananda from the White Chamber. He did not see the young people, and so never knew that their brief stay beneath the Palace of Justice had turned their hair the same color as the tiled walls of their cells.

Weary and ready to go home, Yama was thinking of Hariko and his children when a piece of copy containing two lines of script was hand-delivered to his desk. Thus he learned that the woman Lata, last survivor of Crux on earth, had been tracked down at a village near Karakorum. She had committed suicide before the polizi and the Darksiders arrived and had left this note.

"It is all over," she wrote, "and I know it. This world endures as if protected by a god. But what sort of god would protect *this* world?"

Yama slid the paper into a port on his mashina.

"Copy, file, destroy," he said.

On the next Great Genghis Day, Government of the Universe Place was crowded with people. From every flagpole hung nine white faux yaktails in honor of the famous Unifier of Humankind. But the event of the day was not honoring Genghis — though President Mobutu burned incense on his grave — but the dedication of Stef's memorial.

As the veil over the statue fell, Dzhun and Selina stood together looking at an idealized Stef striding ever forward, holding an impact pistol in one hand and a globe symbolizing the world order in the other.

Since Dzhun was only semiliterate, Selina read the epitaph that Yang had composed: "Like the Great Khan in Courage and Like Jesus in Self-Sacrifice."

"Yang's been made a grandee, you know," Dzhun said. "They needed

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somebody to purge subversives from the University, and he just dropped into the slot. We're lucky to have him for a customer."

She had used the million Stef had left her, not to buy a cottage or get an education, but to open her own brothel. She called it House of Timeless Love. With clever Selina to manage it — and to serve a few select customers, such as the now famous, rich and powerful Yang — it had rapidly become the most popular of the newer houses, with capacity crowds every night.

Selina smiled down at her friend and employer.

"Anyway, the statue's nice. Of course he never walked stiff-legged like that. Stef just lounged around."

"I think I preferred him as he was," mused Dzhun. "Alive."

"You loved him, didn't you?"

"I guess so. I really don't know much about love. I know that I love you."

She and Selina had been sleeping together for years. Sometimes they made love, but sex wasn't really the point. After the night's work was done and all the customers were gone, they lay together for comfort, holding each other close.

"Can I ask you something, Dzhun?"

"Anything. Almost anything."

"How'd you get Stef to leave you all that money? Was it just telling him that you had a senator on the string?"

"That was part of it. But also I made up a sad story about myself and fed it to him. You know, in spite of everything he was sentimental. That's why he was thrown out of the Security Forces. I was working for the polizi then, keeping them informed about my customers. When I reported that Stef was working on an important secret project, I got a bonus. Kathmann himself told me about Stef's weakness," said Dzhun proudly. "Even way back then I had powerful friends, Selina."

"*Tu nespravimy,* Dzhun," said her friend, smiling and shaking her head. "You're incorrigible."

"What's that word mean?"

Selina told her. Dzhun smiled; she liked the sound of it.

"Well, honey, if you ask me, we live in an incorrigible world."

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In college, the members of my dining hall were challenged each year to work one particular sentence into all their senior theses. During my senior year, the sentence was a line from the film Robocop: *"I'll buy* that *for a dollar!"*

Really, that's all I had in mind at Philcon when I pulled some change out of my pocket...

The Madness of Gordon Van Gelder

By Michael Swanwick

THE ORIGINS OF MADNESS are a mystery. The progress of madness as a disease, however, can often be precisely documented.

For Gordon Van Gelder, it all began at a room party in the SFWA suite at Philcon. He was listening to Michael Swanwick spout off about his uncanny facility with short-short stories. Michael, it seems, had bragged to Nancy Kress about the exact same thing and then, in the face of her disbelief, written a short-short about her while waiting in the bar to go to dinner with Nancy and her husband, Charles Sheffield. The punch line to this not terribly involving story was that Nancy had immediately cried, "Oh my God, promise you won't sell this story to Gardner!"

At which point Gordon had whipped out fifty cents and said, "I'll buy it."

There were no immediate repercussions from this incident. Swanwick had taken it for the joke it was meant to be, and laughed. But afterwards...

Afterwards, thinking it over, Gordon realized that he had felt an illicit thrill from the incident. It was morally wrong for an editor to buy

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something sight unseen. It was wicked. It was perverse. And therefore, necessarily, it was exciting.

A week later, a story from Jim Kelly arrived in the mail. Gordon knew it would be good. Jim sweated his guts out over his fiction. He wouldn't have sent it in, if it weren't worth publishing. Reading the thing was only a formality, after all. And if he did read it, wouldn't that be needlessly depriving himself of a very special thrill?

It would.

"Buy this," Gordon told his assistant, and leaned back in his chair, eyes half closed, breathing shallowly.

But it didn't...wouldn't...couldn't end there, after all. One thing led to another. Gordon bought more and increasingly more stories sight unseen. Stories by unpublished amateurs. Stories by people he knew couldn't write.

Word got around.

Why drag out the story? Less than a year after that fatal room party, Gordon found himself standing out on Fifth Avenue, assailed by would-be writers. Gonnabes, wannabes, notachanceinhelltabes filled the street, stopped the traffic, shrieked like banshees, thrust forward clumsily typed and badly penciled and incoherently crayoned manuscripts, while Gordon, tattered and bleeding, accepted all they could give him and demanded more.

The SWAT team was called out. Water hoses were employed, and then live ammo. Writers were mowed down like the cockroaches they were. Until finally the street was cleared and an angry police officer confronted the unrepentant editor.

"All right," the policeman growled, "what's the story here?"

"I don't give a damn," Gordon said. "I'll buy it."

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Alex Irvine hails from Michigan but has been living in Denver for the past few years, working on a Ph.D. in English. (As this issue goes to press, however, he and his wife Beth are busily moving to Massachussetts.) He says he has never actually worked as a bartender, but various jobs in his past have included actor, teacher, truck driver, and roller-skating waiter. He has sold works recently to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine *and to* Asimov's; *this moving fantasy, however, is both his first sale and his first published work of fiction.*

Rossetti Song

By Alexander C. Irvine

SOME PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS wanted to be President, or a baseball player, or a movie star, or business tycoon. Me, I've always wanted to own a bar. Not some flaky franchised chicken-finger paradise for post-fraternity muscleboys and their bimbos; a real shot-and-a-beer kind of neighborhood joint. Pool table or two in the back, an old Wurlitzer by the bathroom doors, a long mirror behind the bar suitable for the sort of what's-he-got-that-I-ain't-got scrutiny to which melancholy drunks love to subject themselves. Tables with a topography of cigarette burns, water rings, dents of uncertain origin, all preserved under a quarter-inch layer of varnish. Beer signs on the walls, no bikinis or volleyballs allowed, just painted mirrors and classic flickering neon like the sign out front that says FRANK'S PLACE. Cab company numbers taped to the side of the phone. A blackboard leaning against the mirror advertising the day's special and a permanent addendum: HANGOVERS FREE OF CHARGE.

An old neighborhood bar, like I said, but it's hard to find a good one because fewer and fewer people live in the old neighborhoods anymore and

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the ones who are left don't talk to each other. Harder still to start one up, because any place that will support one already has one, but that's a defeatist attitude as Susan would have said. A real go-getter can-do type of person, that was my wife. She died the day after my small-business loan was approved. Car wreck. She wanted me to have the bar, though; ever since I'd known her she'd said I was born to be a bartender. How do people decide things like that?

Did you know that more Americans die every year in car wrecks than were killed in Vietnam? Or maybe it's every two years. Nine months ago I wouldn't have known that, but tending bar fills you up with more useless trivia than you would think any one brain could hold. I know that the Ambassador Bridge in Detroit runs south to Windsor, Canada, and that Wally Pipp is the name of the guy who lost his job to Lou Gehrig. Bar bets. There is nothing so esoteric or irrelevant that someone won't bet a beer over it.

I spent Susan's insurance policy on an antique Wurlitzer that plays real records. Limits my selection a bit, but the kind of crowd I draw has a certain collective taste and the guy who sold me the juke threw in about twelve hundred forty-fives that he'd been collecting since 1956. So I have Elvis and Patsy Cline, the Beatles and Marvin Gaye, Louis Armstrong and Johnny Cash, along with tons of stuff that I've never even played. And I take requests, got a sign over the Wurlitzer, so I find myself sorting through those boxes of forty-fives looking for something that I'm pretty sure I should have even though I've never actually seen it. It was because of one of those requests that I struck up an acquaintance with Milt Chrzanowski.

A guy — not Milt — sat down at the bar once in the early evening, not long after I'd opened, and said, "Beer."

I love people who order like that; to a bartender, it's an expression of trust. At least, I choose to look at it that way since the alternative is believing that people don't care what they drink, and that concept is unsettling and foreign to people such as myself. This guy looked at first inspection like a local-brew sort (not something I can explain), so I cracked open a Pike. After a second look, I set it down without a glass.

"Nice juke," he said, finding the beer without looking at either it or me. He took a long swig, glanced at the label, and dug a twenty out of his shirt pocket. "What's on it?"

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People always ask me that when they see it's an antique, as if I'm only going to have some sort of theme music. It annoys me. The guy got up and walked over to the box, standing slightly bent in front of it as he examined the selections; he was taller than he'd looked sitting down. He stayed that way for a long time.

There were eight or ten people in the place, Boeing workers and fishermen killing time until their boats went back out. Two or three trickled in every time one or two wandered out. I lost track of the guy as I filled orders and shot the shit with regulars about the Sonics' postseason collapse and the continued influx of Californians into our fair city. Eventually my granola-punk waitress Donna came in and everything leveled off into an average Wednesday night. I was unloading the dishwasher when I looked up to see the tall guy back at the bar. He waggled his empty beer at me. As I set a fresh one in front of him (I'd guessed right about the glass), he dropped a five on the bar and walked off.

Donna sashayed up to the bar laden with empties. "You haven't even noticed my new tattoo," she said petulantly.

"I lose track," I said, flinging bottle caps all over the floor behind the bar. I have a trash can by the coolers, but some nights my aim is off.

"Do tattoos change color when you get a sunburn?"

The speaker was not the tall guy. He was a slight balding fortyish guy in a pinstripe suit that looked kind of crooked. Except for the suit he kind of resembled me. I looked around for Donna but she was gone, a faint odor of patchouli her only remnant.

"Dunno," I said. "I never had one."

"Neither have I," he said.

"Fine place you have here," he added, squinting into the narrow neck of his bottle. "The Wurlitzer is a lovely touch."

He gave me a funny look when he said that, like he expected it to mean something more, or at least other, than just what he said. I'm a bartender; when in doubt, I always agree. "Yup."

"You don't recognize me, do you?" he said, looking back into his bottle. I've heard many a man swear that they saw God in the bottom of a beer bottle. Myself, I just usually feel Him pounding on my head the next morning.

"'Fraid not."

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"Ah well," he said, motioning for another beer. "I guess you wouldn't, but those of us in invisible occupations occasionally pine for recognition. We are the offensive linemen of the commercial banking world, the mid-level functionaries."

Lawyers and bankers, two kinds of people you never want to piss off. "I'm sorry, ah, Mister..."

"Chrzanowski."

"Oh, yeah," I nodded vigorously. "I remember talking to you now." It was actually true. He had called to reassure me that the loan was not in danger because of Susan's death. I had been worried because she made quite a bit more money as an engineer than I did as a local government reporter for the *P-I*, and I had quit my job to give the bar a go. So they could justifiably have worried about my ability to make the payments. But we had some money put away, and even after the funeral expenses and the Wurlitzer there was a bit of insurance money left over. I was a financially comfortable widower, at least as long as the bar broke even. "It's Milt, right?"

He brightened. "That's right, Mr. Sutter," he said, reaching for his wallet.

I shook my head. "On the house, Milt, as long as you never call me Mr. Sutter again." I caught myself just as I began to slide into smarmy-bartender mode. "The name's — "

"Frank, yes, I remember." We shook hands, me self-consciously wiping my hand on a towel first. He peered into the full bottle, wrinkled his forehead as if in disappointment, then drank anyway. "You know that this space was occupied by a bar before you leased it, don't you?"

I nodded. "Yeah, they left it a mess, too," I said. "Place was a dive."

He nodded, wistfully I thought. "It was that, at least in its last few years. But in the years before that, it was a place not unlike this one; not too rowdy, but not sanitized either."

I was surprised that my taste in bars had anything in common with that of a mid-level bank manager.

"I used to stop in fairly frequently when I worked out of the branch near here," Milt continued. "Ten years or more, until I transferred downtown in eighty-one, I came to this place to decompress after a busy day of climbing the corporate ladder." He chuckled and shook his head.

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"God, has it been seventeen years? Ambition; glad I've given that up. Middle management is the lubricant in the great engine of commerce," he said grandly, raising his bottle in a toast.

I returned the gesture with a dirty highball glass, and Milt fell silent as I filled Donna's orders. I never did ask her about the sunburn thing.

"They had one of those, too," he said suddenly. I looked up and he was gesturing at the juke with the now-nearly-empty bottle. "Splendid machines, those. Memories as pleasant as the music." He drained the bottle, waved it at me. He was getting lit pretty fast, and the more he drank, the more English he sounded. Not an accent, but choices of words and emphasis. Something.

I set another beer in front of him. He clinked the neck of his empty against its replacement, a sardonic little fare-thee-well. "Have you ever heard of a folk duo called Five and Dime?" he asked.

"Nope," I said. "I wasn't much of a folkie; earnestness makes me squirm."

"Well, you couldn't really be expected to know them if you weren't a native, either. Are you?" I shook my head; I'd grown up and gone to school in Michigan, then ended up in Seattle by way of Texas and Colorado. Susan had more to do with it than anything else. I've always been a sun-worshipper, and there are winters here when I'd willingly trade a week at the beach for melanoma. But love will make you do strange things.

"I didn't think so. Anyway, they were locals, students at the U-Dub." This is a strange local colloquialism; University of Washington, therefore U-W, therefore Yoo-Dub. "They never amounted to more than playing coffeehouses for tips, but they pooled all of their money once and recorded a single. It was 'Tangled Up in Blue,' as Simon and Garfunkel might have done it while on a sodium pentothal IV drip. Godawful song. But it was backed with the most amazing piece of pop music I think I've ever heard, a lovely ballad called 'Rossetti Song.'" He raised a questioning eyebrow at me; I shook my head again and looked at the clock.

Nearly ten. I cracked open my first of the night, cheating by only a few minutes. Since the accident, nostalgic people give me the jitters.

"'Rossetti Song,'" I said under my breath. The sound of the words out loud brought to mind 'Rosetta stone,' and it was in the grip of strange allusions that I went back to lean on the bar opposite Milt.

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"The reason I ask all this," he continued, "is that your predecessor had that song on his jukebox. I was wondering if perhaps you hadn't acquired his collection as part of the lease or something."

"No, I got the spinner and the records from an ad. 'Actually plays records!' the copy said, like it was walking on water, and the guy who sold it to me referred to it as an antique. Shit, it's only two years older than I am."

I paused to drink my beer, get something in my mouth before I started some maudlin rant. "Helluva collection came with it, though; supposed to be twelve hundred, but I haven't counted."

"Twelve hundred," Milt repeated. He drummed his fingers on the bar for a moment, then added, "Did you get it around here?"

"Jesus, Milt," I said, rolling my eyes. "Yes, I'll look for you."

"It's called 'Rossetti Song.'"

"I know."

"Reminded me of the words 'Rosetta stone' the first time I saw the title; isn't that strange?"

I drained my beer. Slowly. "You don't say."

"I do, and you know what else? The word juke comes from Wolof, a West African tribal language. Their word *dzug* means 'to live wickedly.' How about that?" He knocked back the rest of his Pike. "Another, please?"

I got one for him and another for myself, and it still wasn't ten o'clock.

"Rosetta stone," I said, sitting cross-legged on the attic floor of the home Susan and I had bought 4 B.C. Before Crash. Every event, every memory of mine was starting to orient itself around the accident, around the afternoon that I'd come in the front door shouting "I got it! I got it!" and heard the phone ringing. I picked it up and the voice on the other side identified itself as one Maura Yee from Swedish Hospital downtown. I didn't get there in time to say goodbye.

And that was it, really; I was a married newspaper columnist one day and the widowed proprietor of a drinking establishment the next. I wasn't able to either mourn my wife or exult in the realization of a lifelong ambition. They canceled each other out, and I trudged ahead in a sort of dazed equilibrium. No great epiphany, no sudden collapse; just a bit more beer than was really good for me and an aching vacant spot that I tried to pretend wasn't there. And every now and then I would wonder when I

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would begin to mourn, or stop mourning, or begin enjoying Frank's Place, and by the time I got done thinking about it I didn't know what the hell was going on. And at that time it was nearly 1 A.C., almost a whole year; when did everything start up again?

The streetlight across from my house flickered weakly, mortally wounded by neighborhood teenagers. In its sporadic pink-orange light I could just barely read the label of the forty-five that rested in my lap: FIVE AND DIME, it said at the top of the circular label, and on the bottom ROSSETTI SONG 3:47. And running along the outside edge was the legend SPARE CHANGE RECORDS. I'd never heard of the label.

Rossetti, I knew, was a poet. Two of them, as I discovered when I rooted out Susan's *Norton Anthologies* from her undergraduate English courses. I flipped through the wrinkly translucent Norton paper and found Christina Rossetti, younger sister of Dante Gabriel. The first two poems were simply titled "Song," and I put the book down. It was four o'clock in the morning; Milt would be happy and the poems could wait until tomorrow. I reached for my beer, remembered I'd left it upstairs next to the boxes of records. The book lay open in front of me, and I suddenly registered that the handwriting between lines and in margins was Susan's. Susan's from twenty years before, when the only Frank she was interested in was Zappa.

"Yeah, well, he's dead too," I said, and stood up. I flipped the Five and Dime record over in my hands and laid it B-side-up on my ancient Garrand turntable. The soft crackle in the dim room as I laid the needle smoothly on the lip of the record gave me a shiver; it was a sound I loved, bringing a weight of anticipation that the tiny spark of a compact-disc laser cannot match, and the few seconds of not-quite-silence that follow it always flood me with memories of songs, and memories of Susan.

I sat on the floor in front of the couch and picked up the book as the music began, a melancholy call-and-response between two guitars with a faintly Celtic flavor and a definite tinny recorded-in-someone's-bathroom edge. One guitar dropped into a steady chorded dum dadadada dum dadum and the first voice came in, a half-chanted lyric baritone:

I met my love and wooed her, overarched by cypress leaves
She was so frail, her face so pale, I feared that soon I'd grieve.

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My love proved stronger than my fear, and her fair hand I won
Though we both knew her illness grew, our two lives we made one.

It was my wont to mourn her as we clasped our hands together
To slowly walk and hear the clock toll far across the heather.
I had but to caress her cheek; my touch bespoke my fear
"But I still live!" she'd say, and give this song to stop my tears:

And now the second voice (was it Dime or Five, I wondered?) took over from the first, a sprightly tenor dancing a cappella except for a double knock on the guitars at the end of every phrase:

When I am dead, my dearest, sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head, nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me with showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember, and if thou wilt, forget.
I shall not see the shadows, I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale sing on, as if in pain:
And dreaming through the twilight that doth not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember, and haply may forget.

At the second line, I recognized the second "Song" in Christina Rossetti's Norton entry. I followed along as that lovely tenor embraced her words and then soared into wordless arpeggiated harmonizing as the baritone and guitar leapt back in:

One day she lay and could not sing, nor raise her lips to mine
Her breath was stilled, hard sorrow spilled my love upon her dying.
I laid no roses at her head, nor sang a dirge to mourn
An oath I swore, to nevermore love any woman born.

She was my Lady of Shalott, my belle dame sans merci,
And when she died, I only cried to keep her memory.
I walk the grass above her now, and every shady tree
With her voice rings; I know she sings, and know she welcomes me.

* * *

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I sat very still, Susan's handwriting in the margins of the blocky book wavering in my teary gaze. There was a *pop* from the speakers as the needle kicked off the end of the runout groove, and a tear fell directly onto a note she had made next to "Song."

Expressions of mourning, it said. *Dead don't remember us, why should we them?*

The tear sat trembling in an auroral ring of dissolved black ink, smudging the word *don't.* I started to close the book. There was a touch on the back of my left hand, a familiar brushing across the backs of my fingers that started a quivering in my stomach as it paused briefly over the still-pale stripe on my ring finger. Then it was gone, and I was left alone in my house an hour before dawn, my only company the ticking of the runout groove and the crushing realization that she really wasn't ever coming back.

MILT DIDN'T SHOW UP until the next Wednesday. I spent the week staring at the Five and Dime record peeking out from where I'd stashed it behind the cash register. I suppose I was convinced that if I stared at it long enough I would figure out whether what had happened was real. I was wearing my wedding ring again. Donna noticed right away and asked me if I'd been to Vegas and what was her name; after an inexplicable crippling wave of embarrassment, I threw a washcloth at her and went to open the doors. I mopped the floors, got deliveries, sparred with Donna, called cabs for laid-off Boeing riveters, and not once did I find myself suddenly destroyed by remembering that my wife was dead. *Well,* I found myself thinking at irregular intervals, *I guess I went and got over it.* The words wouldn't attach themselves to an emotion.

When I turned around from the register and saw Milt there, the first thing I noticed was that it was nearly twelve, much later than it had been the first time he came in. He was wearing the same crooked suit, wet from the misting rain. I wondered if he wore it every Wednesday. He was the kind of guy who might have a schedule like that.

"Whatever it was I was having last week, I'll have it again," he said, and damned if I could remember. I reasoned that if I couldn't, he couldn't either, and cracked him a Pike. "So — " he said, and I cut him off.

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"Got it," I said, pulling the disc out from behind the register. I returned to the bar and spun it on the polished wood in front of him. "It's been here a week, waiting for you to come back."

Milt seemed afraid to touch the record, afraid even to get near the corner of its plain paper sleeve that pointed at him. "That isn't funny," he said.

It happened to him, too, I thought, although what exactly I meant by *it* I wasn't sure. I looked at the clock again, suddenly in a hurry to chase everyone out and close up; I didn't want to play the song with people around. If whatever had happened in my living room happened again, the whole bar would be treated to the sight of my flipping out over a thirty-year-old garage-folk ballad.

A scan of the premises revealed only three bodies not in my employ, and one of those was Milt. The other two were down to the lukewarm dregs of a pitcher of Budweiser and showed no great promise of finishing it. "Call you a cab, fellas?" I asked, hardly raising my voice over Patsy Cline singing "I Fall to Pieces." The pair squinted up at me, then stubbed out cigarettes and rose to leave.

Donna had already put most of the chairs up. I called her over. "You can go early if you want," I said. "I'm coming in tomorrow morning anyway."

She shook her head. "Rent's going up. I need the hours."

"What, it's Wednesday; you'd be gone by one anyway — never mind, I'll pay you until two. Just go. Deal?"

She looked quizzically at Milt, then back at me. "You just put your wedding ring back on, Frank."

After she left, I turned out the neon signs in the windows and the hanging lights over the pool tables. Streetlights cast spiny shadows of chair legs on the floor, made wavy by the rain and crosshatched by the sharper shadows cast by the single light behind the bar. Across the street was a vacant factory building, most of its windows broken out, graffiti covering the padlocked doors and grimy brick walls. It was raining like hell.

I wondered if my place was going to turn into a sleazy dive the way my predecessor's had; I was on the edge of a vacant part of the city. But who knew? I was also on the edge of a perfectly healthy retail area, and in six

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months Frank's Place could be surrounded by a completely new trendy zone. Fashion was too capricious to be outguessed.

Milt was still staring at the record as if it were a booby-trapped memory. I walked by him and picked it up on my way over to the jukebox. I pulled the juke away from the wall and opened its case, removing the Supremes and dropping Five and Dime in their place. Milt hadn't moved; he was looking at me out of the corner of his eye and gripping his beer in two hands.

I dropped the canopy back into place and was pushing the Wurlitzer back against the wall when Milt said, "It's happened to you too, hasn't it?"

I stood slowly up and wiped my palms carefully on my towel until I was sure I could speak without making a fool of myself. "What exactly do you mean by 'it'?"

"Come on, Frank, you kick everyone out as soon as I get here, send your waitress — who obviously thinks I'm some sort of rough trade — home early, and you're wearing your wedding ring again. I hadn't noticed that until she brought it up, but I'd bet the contents of my branch safe that you played the song and something happened." He was looking at me greedily, practically begging me to admit to something. I wondered what he saw when the song was played. Or thought he saw; maybe I'd just been drunk and feeling guilty.

I dug a quarter out of my pocket. "Why is this song so important to you, Milt?" I asked.

He hesitated, but only for a second. "Because my wife died here while it was playing."

I was looking at the selection cards, and I saw number 126, "Baby Love" by the Supremes, but my hand wouldn't quite move to put the quarter in the slot. "I remember humming along with the tenor over the melody line," Milt went on, "and right at the words 'raise her lips to mine' she put a hand to her temple and just pitched over out of her seat. Her name was Petra and she would have been forty-six this September." He said all of this as if he were the Ancient Mariner, doomed to repeat his tale of woe. I saw that he still wore his wedding band as he pointed to a window table and said, "Right there, under the Mount Rainier sign. That's where it happened."

Milt slid off his stool and walked toward the front table, still pointing.

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"And now when I hear that song in this place, I can see her," he said, his voice beginning to tremble.

His arm fell back to his side as he approached the table and stood in front of it. "After I was transferred downtown, I found a copy of the song and took it home thinking that whenever I needed her I could play it there. But it didn't *work*," he choked, and I could see tears shining in the odd pink glare of the streetlights. "It didn't work, and then this place closed and it was years, *years* before you came along."

Milt paused, his fingers tracing the surface of the table. When he spoke again, he was calmer. "And when your wife died I was terribly afraid that you would refuse the loan and the space would remain vacant for longer than I could stand. A midlife crisis is difficult enough without the added complication of a dead wife you can't talk to, ha ha. So even though I had no idea what you would do with the space, I had to make sure your loan wasn't recalled. And after you actually had the place open, I came in just sort of — quixotic, you know, and saw the jukebox..." He shrugged miserably and produced a handkerchief.

I caught myself punching buttons and realized that I'd put the quarter into the jukebox. The selector arm reached up and plucked the Five and Dime single from the row and laid it on the turntable, and the sad, searching guitars began their once-upon-a-time.

The colors in the Wurlitzer's bubble-glass began to dance, and I could feel gentle vibrations in the palms of my hands as I leaned against the machine and watched Milt stand quietly for a moment, then pull out one chair and stand behind it. He smiled and went around to the other chair, sat down and leaned forward, spoke quietly and reached out, his hand moving like he was brushing his thumb lightly across invisible fingers. He stayed like that, smiling and talking, his eyes alight, and once I swear he laughed out loud and I couldn't hear it.

And I felt nothing.

The song ended, and Milt looked down and shrugged, then lifted his hand in a halfhearted wave. He looked up at me like a man beatified a long time after death.

I stalked across the room and flipped the door key onto his table. "Lock up when you leave," I said harshly, and charged out into the storm.

* * *

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"You haven't slept," Milt chided, looking me up and down from the other side of my screen door the next morning.

"Your goddamn pounding on the door woke me up," I answered truculently, lying. Milt shifted nervously from foot to foot.

"The key," he said, almost as if reminding himself, and he lifted it wrapped in a handkerchief from his breast pocket. "I left the two dollars for the beer next to the register."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," I said, snatching the key from him. We stood there for a moment not looking at each other. "Well — " he said, but I cut him off.

"You had coffee?"

"Well, no," he said. "Is that an invitation?"

Neither one of us spoke again until I'd gotten coffee and we'd both had the first scalding sip. Then the silence seemed more companionable, and finally Milt said, "You can tell they're not English, can't you?"

"What?"

"Five and Dime. Whatever their real names were. Are. I mean, heather and cypress trees don't even grow within a thousand miles of each other, I don't think."

"What's your point, Milt?"

"No point. It was an icebreaker. Another middle-management skill." He sipped at his coffee. "As was accepting this coffee. It gives us a chance to talk. Communication is the first step toward a solution of any problem."

"How come I didn't feel anything last night?" I asked. I have no middle-management skills.

"Why do you expect me to know?" Milt answered.

"Goddammit, Milt. Answer the question."

He paused, and then spoke carefully. "There is a difference," he said, "between mourning and nostalgia. That's as simply as I can put it. And some people make the transition from one to the other invisibly, over a period of time. Invisibly. Ha. That's me," he said bitterly.

Then he shook it off and continued. "Others make it in a great terrifying epiphanic moment. You felt something the first time you played the song?" I nodded. "And where was this?"

"In my living room."

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"But Susan didn't die there, did she?"

"No."

"Well." He rubbed at one eye. "Hm. There's an old saying, ancient really, to the effect that magic only works on those who believe in it. Now I don't necessarily believe that's true, but I do think — how to put this — that there are some things that can be used in unusual ways given the proper circumstances. Which wouldn't arise unless the person was aware of the object's capability, so there you have your 'magic only works' canard. And I suppose this record, or this song, is one of those things. What's it about, after all? Getting past mourning. Are you through mourning your wife?"

I thought about it. *My wife is dead,* I thought, and waited for the squeeze in my chest, the anger, the rotten ache of loss. It didn't come. In its place was a memory, almost a waking dream, an image of the way her fingers used to brush across the backs of mine and linger for a moment on my wedding band, like Piglet saying *I just wanted to be sure of you.* And then it was gone.

I found that my throat was tight, but I was smiling. "'Tis better to have loved and lost, right?" I said. "There's a canard for you."

"That's what I thought," Milt said.

DONNA GOT USED to it, I guess, but she always gave me an odd look when I let Milt stay past closing on Wednesday nights. I let it go; after all, it wasn't something that could be easily explained. Milt and I evolved our own set of rituals attendant only on Wednesdays: he brought a roll of quarters, I left the door key by the register. Usually when I came in the next morning, there were a few empties on the bar and a sawbuck on the register, and in return Milt drank free whenever I was there. It was a peculiar arrangement and it proved satisfactory for both of us, if not for Donna.

And after a dozen Wednesdays, I took a detour on the way home after leaving Milt to his visit. I sat with a six-pack on a park bench facing the Sound and drank slowly until I had to turn around to watch the sun came up. The colors of the dawn take on a certain enduring splendor when you've stayed up all night to see them, as if you've ridden the underworld,

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been swallowed by the wolf and come out the other side. And the sun, oh, the sun, leaping huge and molten from the Cascades and waxing into its full blinding brightness as the city began to wake up around me. I drove home accompanied by foreknowledge of nostalgia.

The next Wednesday was miserable, gray and drizzly, the sun a pale smudge. I spent the day running errands. The evening at the bar passed pretty much like it always did, and Milt showed up at quarter to twelve like he always did.

I stopped Donna before she could escape and handed her an envelope. "Don't read it before you get home," I said.

She shook her head and said, "Nothing you do surprises me anymore." I held the door for her as she left, thinking *Yeah. We'll see.*

Milt and I didn't usually talk on Wednesday nights, him being incoherent with anticipation and me likewise with exhaustion, but tonight I went over to his table after I'd shut everything down and said, "I put the key in an envelope tonight."

He looked at me quizzically. I'm the worst liar in the world, and I know my face was giving something away, but all he did was nod, God bless him, and I walked out the door. Outside it was still raining and I whistled all the way to my car. Then I whistled all the way home, and then I went through the list one more time. Accountant; check. Realtor; check. City clerk; check. Bank account; check.

Loan officer. "Check," I said, and laughed out loud.

I thought about it as I hummed down I-90 past the suburbs and the outlying communities and up into the mountain towns. Thought about the progression from mourning to nostalgia, and moments of epiphany. *Invisible, ha, that's me,* Milt had said, but what he hadn't figured out is that he didn't want it any other way. He'd opted out, settled into a comfortable mid-level job, saved my loan after Susan's death, done everything he could to keep everything the same. Or not even that; he'd gone back, recreated a previous sameness. Petra keeps coming to him because he wants her to.

And that was the one thing Susan was wrong about. The dead do remember us, and they do want to be mourned, and they will keep coming as long as we keep wanting to go to them. That wasn't what I wanted anymore.

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Frank's Place was a huge temple to Susan's memory, an everlasting flame hoping to draw her like an ectoplasmic moth. I threw everything I had into it after she died because it was her dream for me as well as my dream for myself. It took more than a year before I figured out that dreams you dream with someone die with them. Frank's Place was a dead woman's dream kept alive by the living.

And I couldn't keep it alive any longer, but Milt Chrzanowski could. He was on that invisible slow climb, that vision-dulling trudge through the bleak underground of loss and inadequacy and abandoned anger, and Frank's Place had been his dream for a dead woman before anyone had dreamed it for me.

Or maybe that's all bullshit. But Milt signed the quit-claim, and sent a letter to my accountant too. I don't think I want to read it just yet. I do hope Donna still works there, and I told her so in the letter I gave her that last night. There was a check in that envelope too, in case she thought she couldn't work for Milt, but my accountant says she hasn't cashed it. So things are probably just going along there like they always were. Maybe Milt quit at the bank to take on the barkeep's life that was dreamed for him. Maybe not. I imagine I'll find out whenever I read his letter.

Meanwhile, the check from the realtor came, and due to the robust nature of the Seattle housing market I can afford to drive myself a bit further down this road or that, looking for a little sun to worship and a new, living dream instead of a monument to loss. I'm leaving the sad songs to Milt. Let him hear the nightingale. And let him rendezvous with the dead, too; I'll remember if I will.

And if I will, forget.

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SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

NIGHTFALL, REVISITED

"HAVE YOU ever experienced Darkness, young man?" asked a psychologist in Isaac Asimov's famous story, "Nightfall."

Of course, the answer is no. These characters live on the planet of Lagash, which is illuminated by six suns. The people of that world experience the darkness of nightfall once every 2049 years. And when nightfall finally comes, the darkness and the stars ("30,000 mighty suns" in the giant cluster that surrounds the planet) drive them mad.

Now we could take "Nightfall" and get picky. We could ask, for example, why the folks never saw any of these brilliant stars until the exact moment when the eclipse hits totality. Surely some of them would be bright enough to be visible before then. We could wonder about the gravitational situation and the seasons on a planet that somehow orbits six suns.

But we won't go there. It's a great story, and there's no need to quibble with it. Instead, we're going to focus on the question that Asimov's psychologist asked: have you ever experienced Darkness?

Oh, sure — you've been in the dark. You've probably been kept in the dark at one time or another — haven't we all? But have you really experienced darkness? Have you noticed how the world changed as your eyes adjusted to dim light?

Probably not: it's easy to overlook a shift that's been happening all your life. In this column, we'll show you a few experiments that reveal how your eyes adapt to darkness and call attention to some of the peculiarities of your night vision.

THE EDGE OF NIGHT

In total darkness, you can't see. But the world is rarely completely dark. In a situation that most of us would call dark — on a moonless

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night when the only light is from the stars, for example — you can see reasonably well. But your view by night is not the same as your view by day. When the lights are dim and your eyes adapt to darkness, your vision changes — dramatically and fundamentally. It's not just that you can't see as well, though that's what most of us notice. You see differently.

It takes your eyes some time to adapt to darkness. Go for a walk on a country road on a moonless night. For the first few minutes you can't see very well at all, but after five minutes in the dark, your eyes begin to adapt and you can see better. The sky looks lighter than the trees; you can make out vague shapes, see the path in front of you, Over the next half hour or so, your eyes will continue to adapt to the darkness. After a prolonged period in the dark, you may be able to see well enough to spot a light as dim as a candle ten miles away. When fully adapted to darkness, your eyes may be up to one hundred thousand times more sensitive to light than they are on a sunny afternoon.

LETTING IN THE LIGHT

As your eyes adapt to the dark, they undergo a number of changes. You can easily observe one of these changes. All you need is a mirror and a dimly lit room with a light you can switch on.

Switch on the light and take a close look at your eyes in the mirror. In the center of each colored iris is a round black opening called the pupil. Light enters your eye through the pupil. The bigger the pupil is, the more light can enter your eye.

Now turn the light off while watching your pupils. You'll see them open wide to let in more light. Turn the light on again, and watch your pupils shrink.

The moment that you step into darkness, the muscles of the iris relax to let your pupil open wide and let in more light. At its smallest, the pupil of the human eye is just over one thousandth of a square inch in area. In a fifth of a second, the pupils can expand dramatically. If you linger in the darkness, they continue to open wider. A flash photo of a fully dark-adapted eye is truly eerie — the pupils look far too large. At its largest, the area of the pupil is up to fifty times its contracted size, letting in up to fifty times more light.

Your pupils are constantly adjusting to minor changes in lighting, expanding when a cloud covers

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the sun or shrinking when you walk from a shadowy hallway to a brightly lit room. If you watch the pupils of other people's eyes, you may notice that the pupils sometimes change size even when there has been no change in lighting. Under normal lighting, have a friend focus on something far away. Watch her eyes as she shifts her gaze to something nearby. Chances are, you'll see her pupils shrink. Closing down the pupil helps a person see nearby objects in better focus. When gathering light is more important than a sharp image, the pupil opens up. When there's enough light to sacrifice a little to improve focus, the pupil may close down. The older you get, the more your pupil works to compensate for your failing vision.

Psychologists say that your pupil also expands when you see something you like. We've heard that ancient Oriental jade merchants used to watch a customer's eyes when displaying items for sale. If the pupils expanded, the merchant knew that the customer really liked a particular item — and priced it high. Not knowing any ancient Oriental jade merchants, we've been unable to confirm the story, but it sounds convincing.

***

AT NIGHT, ALL CATS ARE GRAY

After your pupils have opened wide, your eyes continue to adapt to darkness. Deep inside your eye, certain cells become more sensitive so that they can take advantage of the dim light that's available. You can't see these changes, but you can see the results if you are patient.

To understand how your eyes adapt to darkness, you need to know why you can see at all. You see when light stimulates the light-sensitive cells in your eye. These cells are called photoreceptors — "photo" is the Greek word for "light." The photoreceptors of your eye are part of the retina, a layer of cells at the back of your eyeball. The photoreceptors detect light and the patterns that it forms on the retina, then sends this information to your brain via the optic nerve.

Your retina contains two kinds of photoreceptors: cones and rods. Cones operate in bright light and let you see color; rods are more sensitive to dim light than cones, but can't distinguish color. Each of your eyes contains about 6.5 million cones and 125 million rods.

In the first five minutes after you step into a dark room, your

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eyes' sensitivity to light increases dramatically. Then the rate of change slows and levels off to a plateau. After a few minutes, sensitivity begins to increase once again. Over the next half hour or so, your eyes gradually become more and more sensitive to light.

That plateau when your eyes' sensitivity seems to have leveled off indicates a shift from one system of photoreceptors to another. During the first five minutes that you are in the dark, all the photoreceptors in your eye — both rods and cones — are gradually becoming more sensitive to light. As the cones become more sensitive, you can see dimmer colored lights. But eventually the cones reach their limit — they become as sensitive to light as they can get.

At that point, the rods take over. The rods are much more sensitive to light than the cones. And the longer you keep them in the dark, the more sensitive they become.

In bright light, your vision depends on the cones; in dimmer light, you use the rods. When you are depending on the rods for your view of the world, your color vision goes away. The rods register the pattern of light on the retina — they can distinguish bright light from dim light — but they don't distinguish one color from another.

Next time you're in a darkened movie theater, take a look at your clothing. To your dark-adjusted eyes, a yellow shirt may appear to be pale gray, red will look black, and other colors will appear as various shades of gray. But the bright pictures of the movie screen and the glowing EXIT signs will still appear in color. Even when you are seeing the world with your rods, your cones are there. If there's a light that's bright enough to stimulate them, you'll see that bright light in color, even though you see the rest of your surroundings in shades of gray.

If you feel like experimenting with this, find a batch of identical colored pencils, markers, or crayons. Take these and some white paper into a dark room. When your eyes have adapted to the darkness, write down, with each marker, the color that you think it is. Or draw a picture with your markers — like maybe a little house with a green lawn, a yellow sun in a blue sky, and some orange flowers in the yard.

Then turn on the lights and see how you did. Chances are, you didn't do very well. The world that you see in dim light is similar to the world of the achromat, that rare

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person who has no color vision at all. Knut Norby, a vision researcher who was also an achromat, wrote of his childhood experiences with crayons: "...I always confused the colors, breaking all the conventions and 'rules' about what were the 'correct' colors to use: I would happily color the sky light green, yellow, or pink; the grass and leaves orange or dark blue; the sun white or light blue, and so on. I was always corrected in my choice of colors by those who knew better, and, eventually, I gave up painting and coloring my drawings."

If you start paying attention to the colors you see in dim light, you may notice a strange shift. In bright light, reds and yellows often look brighter — more intense — than blues. But in dim light, blues often look brighter than reds. Fire engines are painted red so that they'll be bright and easy to see. And during the day, they are. But on a dark night, a bright red fire engine fades to black (which is why some towns are painting fire engines bright yellow-green, a color that's bright in dim light as well as in daylight).

Back in 1825, Czechoslovakian physiologist Johannes Purkinje noticed that colors change with the light. He observed that two painted posts, one red and one blue, were equally bright when he saw them at noon. At dawn, however, the blue post looked brighter than the red one.

Dubbed the Purkinje shift, this subtle perceptual change happens when your eyes shift from relying primarily on cones to relying primarily on rods. Rods only detect whether a light is bright or dim. But they aren't equally sensitive to all colors of light. Viewing a red light and a blue light of equal brightness, the rods will see the blue light as brighter. They'll barely detect the red light at all.

Night pilots and astronomers have turned the rods' low sensitivity to red light to their advantage. During World War II, the ready rooms where pilots prepared for night missions were illuminated with red lights. Because the red light kept pilots' rods in the dark, the rods began adjusting to darkness before the lights actually went out.

THE MONSTER IN THE CLOSET

Under red light, you can read, write, and make out the details of your surroundings. Switch off the red light and shift to rod vision alone, and the type on the page

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becomes illegible. In a darkened room, you have to fill in the details as best you can. The process can transform the clothes in the closet into the monsters of childhood nightmares. Blame those night monsters on an overactive imagination — and, of course, the rods in your retina.

Rods and cones are not evenly distributed across your retina. Near the center of the retina, there's a small region called the fovea, where the cones are packed tightly together and there are no rods at all. Outside the fovea, there are fewer cones and many rods.

The rods at the periphery of the retina tend to merge their signals to the brain. A single nerve fiber may carry information from as many as 600 rods. By contrast, one nerve fiber typically carries information from a single cone.

As a result, the views of the world provided by the rods and the cones are very different. The cones of your fovea give you a very detailed view of the world. Your rods provide a coarser, less detailed view than your cones, partly because they provide the brain with less information about the light they detect. You can think of the view provided by the cones as a pointillist painting created with a fine brush and bright colors — and the view provided by the rods as the same painting, recreated with a wide brush and shades of gray. Details that are distinguished in the first painting are lost in the second.

The distribution of rods and cones in the retina also explains a trick that nighttime security guards and astronomers use. To spot an intruder in a dark warehouse or a dim star in the night sky, they never stare directly at what they are trying to see. Instead, they look slightly above or below the object of interest. Try this yourself: in dim light, you'll see an object more clearly if you don't look at it directly. You can use this technique, known as "averted vision," to try to count all seven of the "seven sisters" that make up the constellation Pleiades.

When you stare at something, you are focusing its image on the fovea. In daylight, that's great: the densely packed cones in the fovea give you a very detailed, colored view of the world. But in dim light, your cones don't function. Since the fovea lacks rods, it's virtually blind in the dark. When you look just above or below something, the images falls outside the fovea, on the periphery of the retina, where there are more rods than cones, giving you a much better view.

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SLOW SIGHT

Many of the changes in your vision that come with darkness are obvious. But the last change that we'll describe is one that you'll probably never notice under ordinary circumstances: your eyes see more slowly in dim light than they do in bright light.

The photoreceptors of your retina don't respond immediately to a flash of light. The dimmer the light, the longer the delay between the flash and the photoreceptor's response. When you put on a pair of sunglasses and dim the light that reaches your eyes, you are actually slowing your vision down by a fraction of a second. Practically, this delay doesn't affect your vision, but it can produce a dramatic optical illusion called the Pulfrich effect, named after Carl Pulfrich, the man who discovered it. We describe how you can duplicate this illusion at home on page 126.

BEYOND NIGHTFALL

In this column, we've been talking about what happens to your vision in what most of us call darkness — that is, in very dim light. Few of us have experienced complete darkness, where there is no light at all.

Paul says that the best place to experience darkness is deep in the bowels of a cave. Turn off all the lights in a cave and you are really, truly in the dark. Paul has done this on several different occasions and he reports that somehow the darkness felt "thick." He held up his hand an inch in front of his face and yet could see nothing.

The darkness of a cave, Paul says, is much more alarming than the darkness of night. Outdoors, no matter how dark the night, he knows that the sky will eventually brighten. But in the cave, he knows that light will never return naturally. Sitting in a dark cave, he says, gave him more sympathy for the characters in "Nightfall."

Pat says she doesn't need to sit in a dark cave to have sympathy for the characters in "Nightfall." As a child, she was certain that monsters lived in dark places — in caves, in the basement, under her bed. She knows now that the space below her bed is filled with dustbunnies and boxes of books. There's no room for monsters. But Pat can remember the feeling of terror quite clearly.

Fear of the dark echoes the memories of a long distant past, when only the light of a bonfire stood between our ancestors and the fierce predators that roamed in

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the night. Our ancient ancestors huddled by the fire; we switch on the electric lights and chase away the night.

But tonight, before you switch on the lights, take a moment to appreciate the darkness. No one likes to be kept in the dark, a condition that we equate with ignorance and confusion. But only by keeping yourself in the dark can you test the limitations of your vision and explore its abilities. We suggest you give it a try.

Note: For more about Pat Murphy's and Paul Doherty's work, check out their Web sites at: www.exo.net/jaxxx and www.exo.net/~pauld.

EXPERIMENT #1: THE PULFRICH ILLUSION

To create a startling optical illusion, you'll need a pair of sunglasses or a dark filter, a helper, a piece of string about three feet long, and something white that you can tie or tape to the string. (Pat usually uses a rock wrapped in typing paper.)

Use your white object and the string to make a pendulum. In a well-lit place, have your helper stand a few yards away from you and swing the pendulum back and forth, perpendicular to your line of sight.

Cover one eye with the dark filter or with one lens of the sunglasses. Keeping both eyes open, watch the pendulum. Does it still look like it's swinging back and forth, or has its path changed?

Now move the filter to the other eye. How does the path of the pendulum change?

When you covered one eye with a filter, the pendulum's path apparently changed from a back-and-forth motion to an ellipse. When you switched the filter from one eye to the other, the direction of the ellipse changed — if it was traveling clockwise, it switched to counterclockwise, and vice versa.

In dim light, your eyes respond a little bit more slowly than they do in bright light. As a result, the eye with the filter sees the pendulum where it used to be — a fraction of a second behind the position observed by the eye without the filter. Your brain combines the views of your two eyes to make a three-dimensional picture of the world. By changing the view that one eye sees, you change the picture that your brain creates.

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EXPERIMENT #2: HALF-ADAPTED VISION

To try this experiment, all you need is a weak bladder.

Before you go to bed, drink a couple of glasses of water. When you wake up in the middle of the night (as you almost certainly will), DON'T turn on the lights.

First, cover your right eye with your hand. Keep that eye firmly covered and in the dark as you turn on the bathroom light and go about your business. (Yes, we know this can be a bit of a challenge. No one said being a scientist was easy.)

When you return to your dark bedroom, notice what you can see. Now uncover your right eye and cover your left. What can you see now?

Your right eye is adapted to darkness; your left eye lost its adaptation to darkness when you flicked on the bathroom light. So your right eye can see more in your dark bedroom than your left.

Spelunkers use this trick. Before exploring a cave, they wear a patch over one eye, adapting that eye to darkness. When they enter the cave, they take off the patch.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH OUR COVER STORY is Bradley Denton's "Bloody Bunnies." The story describes the day Mr. Denton died, which might not sound terribly upbeat, but in fact the story is a thoroughly enjoyable piece of weirdness from the heart of Texas. (Emus included.)

We'll also have Rick Wilber on the mound next month with a new baseball story. "In Boise" returns to the year of 1941 to meet a coach whose priorities seem to be a bit askew...or are they?

Also on tap is Scott Westerfeld's lovely tale of a young woman coming of age between the stars, "The Movements of Her Eyes." We expect also to have stories next month from M. John Harrison and Ellen Steiber, along with our usual columns on books and films and science (oh my!).

But we do have one bit of bad news to report: rising costs are requiring us to raise our subscription rates starting with the June issue. Take advantage of our rates now while they're still low.

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Henry Slesar has been writing professionally since the 1950s. He won an Edgar Award for his first novel, The Gray Flannel Shroud, *wrote a couple dozen episodes of the television show "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," and headed up the writing crew for many years on the soap opera "The Edge of Night." (That last experience serves as the background for his most recent novel,* Murder at Heartbreak Hospital, *which is currently being filmed in New York City.) His last appearance in our pages was back in 1991 with "Deuce." His new one takes us into the art world with a bit of a puzzle...*

The Museum

By Henry Slesar

"I SAW HER IN PARIS LAST month," Stearman said, "and she looked different. She wasn't the same old gal. I thought it was me, my eyesight maybe, or the little drop of muscatel I had with my breakfast. What, never had wine on your corn flakes? How old are you, anyway?"

The young woman in the black dress smiled, but she didn't look happy to be trapped in a corner of the gallery, impaled by Stearman's heavy whiskey breath. Mason didn't know the girl, but it was his party, and his responsibility to rescue her. He extricated himself from two bearded men arguing about Claes Oldenberg, and clapped his friend on the shoulder.

"That's just like you, Stearman, monopolizing the prettiest woman in the room." He grinned at the girl, who mumbled something about her "friend" and ducked under Stearman's imprisoning arm. Stearman blinked at him, flushed and jowly, and with a pang Mason remembered that they were the same age.

"It's true," Stearman said, as if Mason had been part of the conversation.

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"Mrs. Gheraldini didn't look like herself. Nobody else noticed it, but you know me, Mason. I'm her steady customer."

Mason made the connection. "Lisa Gheraldini. Mona Lisa." He knew about Stearman's obsessive attachment to the painting. There had even been an article in *Art News* about him: "Seeing the Mona Lisa — 1,200 Times."

"You know what I think?" Stearman poked Mason's breastbone. "I think somebody swiped it. I think they put up a hell of a good copy. But nobody can tell me that's the original Da Vinci. Hey, why don't you look into it, Mason? That's your line of work, isn't it?"

"Not anymore," Mason Graves said. "I've settled down, or haven't you noticed?" He looked around the small gallery, as if it made the statement self-evident. There were only three people left in the room, and they seemed ready to leave. There couldn't have been more than a dozen at the start; people weren't venturing out into the unseasonable weather, a miasmic heat that had lingered well into November. Or it may have been the artist he was exhibiting. He had called himself a neorealist, which seemed to mean ugly portraiture, and only one picture had been sold.

"Somebody's got to do something about it," Stearman said. "I wrote to the Louvre, I told them about the switch. They wrote back and said I was wrong. What else would they say? But I'm not wrong. I know my babe. That wasn't her, buddy. No way."

Mason closed up at midnight and went home. He rented a studio apartment only three blocks from the gallery. His answering machine was blinking, and he guessed correctly about the first two recorded calls. One was the artist, enraged by the poor turnout at the opening. The other was his ex-wife, asking for money. The third was from Bodo Shieffer, the assistant curator of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

Mason thought twice about returning the call the next morning. He was counting pennies, and beginning to doubt his recent investments. But he hadn't seen Bodo for five or six years, whenever it had been that he had recovered the missing Brueghel in the museum's own workshop.

Calculating the six-hour time difference, he reached Bodo at closing time. Bodo started exclaiming in German before Mason reminded him of the language problem. In perfect English, Bodo said:

"Please keep this confidential, Mason. It may be another silly

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misplacement, like the Brueghel, but I doubt it. The Cellini was in an unbreakable glass case, and the lock was jimmied."

"The Cellini! Are you saying it's missing?"

"Yes. The pepper pot, the beautiful silver one, with the figures. I can't swear how long ago it was removed. We don't take inventory that often, although that's what we've been doing, ever since we discovered the piece was gone." He answered Mason's questions impatiently. "Yes, yes, of course we called the police, the Museum directors called everyone, but I'm the only one who thought of calling you, so don't disappoint me!"

Mason explained that he was no longer doing investigatory work, that he was now a legitimate gallery owner, and he would have gone on making excuses if Bodo hadn't dropped a five-figure fee into the conversation. Non-refundable, even if Mason failed? "Yes," Bodo said.

Stearman's return from Europe proved a godsend. Mason asked his friend if he would manage the gallery for a few weeks, and Stearman was delighted. His only condition was Mason's promise to "look in" on his beloved Madonna.

Stearman drove him to the airport, a favor Mason regretted when his friend launched into his usual complaint about the frustrations of their calling.

"People like us are never happy," he said. "We love Art. We live for Art. But we're not artists, and nothing we do in Art satisfies our hunger. Art is like a beautiful mistress who won't let us into her boudoir...."

"Don't miss the exit," Mason said.

Aboard the plane, he managed to get the attention of a flight attendant carrying the morning papers. He spread the *Times* on his lap and skimmed the headlines. The lead stories were about a Senatorial scandal, the imminent launch of the space station, the heat wave, the standoff in the Mideast. But only one headline stopped his eye.

"PRICELESS PAINTING MISSING FROM MET. Vermeer's 'Young Woman with Water Jug' Vanishes in Apparent Theft."

He was so wrapped up in the text that he wasn't aware of the takeoff, a blessing for a white-knuckled flier. There had been surprisingly few thefts at the Metropolitan Museum, considering its vastness. And how even a clever thief could make off with such a rare and famous work was mind-boggling.

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Mason thought about the stolen Vermeer for most of the flight across the ocean, chastising himself for not paying more attention to the problem he was being paid to solve. Of course, "Woman with Jug" was virtually unsaleable, so a ransom demand would probably follow. Unless, of course, it was an act of madness or whimsy, like that of Vincenzo Perugia, who swiped the Mona Lisa back in 1908, simply to return it to his native Italy.

Mona Lisa. She just wasn't the same babe...

He shook off the sound of Stearman's voice in his head, and asked for a drink. By the time it arrived, Mason was asleep.

Vienna wasn't one of Mason's favorite cities. He knew there was a baroque romanticism behind the cold edifices of the Esterhazy and Auersperg palaces, that there was Music in the fiber of the city, but all he had ever seen was the inside of its Art Museum and the Hilton Hotel with its Art Noveau and Art Deco concentration, not a conducive setting for a man of Renaissance leanings. The air conditioning worked, however, and he was grateful for it, the heat wave having blanketed Europe as well.

In the morning he set up a meeting with Bodo Shieffer and two of the Museum's directors.

They were all agreed about one thing. It could not have been an inside job. The only guard who might have connived to let someone carry out the Cellini pot had been with the Kunsthistorisches for almost two decades. In tears, he had begged for a lie detector test to prove his innocence. Nor was there any question of the piece being hidden in the Museum itself for later reclamation. They had searched every nook and cranny, or the Deutsche equivalent of the phrase. And who had been the last person observed near the Cellini? A man of impeccable credentials, Hugh Barrows of England's National Gallery. Mason listened to their fervent pleadings with the ironic realization that they were denying that the theft could possibly have occurred. But there was no denying the sprung lock, the empty case.

"Give us a theory," Bodo begged him. "Anything at all, Mason!"

"All right," Mason said obligingly. "First of all, the lock was probably broken before the theft took place, hours or even days before."

"*Aber warum*?" a director asked.

"Because if the act had been observed, the thief could have claimed it was only an accident. Suspicious, but not enough to warrant his arrest."

"And nobody noticed the broken lock?"

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"You don't take inventory every day, and you don't examine locks every day. Do you? The thief knew he could come by at a later, safer time, and remove the pepper pot without a sound during some quiet hour."

"But how would he get it past the guard?"

"He could have brought the means with him. A workman with a tool box, a 'fat' man with an inflated balloon under his coat. A false umbrella, a bumbershoot big enough to accept the pepper pot. There are many ways these things are done."

Mason was feeling a trifle smug at having explained the inexplicable, but Bodo and the directors didn't seem impressed.

"The guards don't remember any workman, any fat man, and the sun has been shining for weeks!"

"And even if what you describe is true, how do we find the man?"

The last question had to be translated.

"I don't know yet," Mason said. "I never said I was Sherlock Holmes with a magnifying glass. What I do best is talk to people. People involved in this sort of crime, who have committed art thefts before, and know what's going on."

"Informants," Bodo said.

"In the States, we call them stoolies."

He didn't mention that most of his connections hadn't heard from him in half a dozen years.

When he returned to his hotel, he flipped on the television set, and the first story on CNN International was from Spain. Goya's "Naked Maja" had been stolen from the Prado.

Mason sat heavily on the bed and stared at the screen, long after it had started reporting other stories, from Bosnia and South Africa.

There was no way he could use the word "coincidence" to describe the loss of three of the world's greatest works of art in as many days. Or was it four? He grabbed the phone and put in a call to Jean Paul Mattrey, the editor of France's most prestigious art publication, a consultant to the Louvre, and, thank heavens, a bilingual friend.

"The Mona Lisa? You're joking, Mason."

"I just want your opinion, and as quickly as possible."

He didn't fall asleep until three, troubled by jet lag and a busy mind. He was awakened by the telephone, and heard Jean Paul say:

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"The lady is in place, Mason. They may have the Venus, but they don't have the Madonna."

"Venus? What Venus?"

"Then you haven't heard?" the Frenchman said. "Last night, the Venus of Urbino was stolen. Titian's Venus, remember? You and I once saw it together, at the Uffizi in Florence. Are you still there, Mason?"

Mason forced his tongue to work. "How in God's name could it have happened? I never believed in masterminds before — "

"Then don't start," Mattrey snorted. "This was a crude stick-up. They chloroformed two guards, they rushed the painting out in broad daylight, three masked men. Mafioso, maybe. It's insanity, Mason! Where will it end?"

He spent a frustrating morning trying to reach Werner Kempel in Berlin, only to learn that Werner, having been recently released from prison, was now in London. At least, that was what his Japanese wife Miyako told him, but Miyako was notoriously protective of her husband.

In Mason's opinion, Werner Kempel was the greatest art thief in history. He had started as an apprentice to his criminal father — following, you might say, in his father's fingerprints — but it was his mother's love of Art which decided Werner's specialty. His ingenuity was fabled. At twelve, in the costume of a choirboy, he had lifted a priceless fruitwood Madonna over his head and marched out with a church processional, singing at the top of his lungs. Of course, he kept on marching when he reached the street. When he was older, he managed to steal almost two dozen notable paintings, mostly from private collectors, churches, or small security-deprived museums. He was sought out by other specialists in the field, and he was soon part of the network that was operating to this day.

That was Mason's hope, of course. Werner always knew what the movers and shakers of the art underworld were about. On occasion, usually when facing yet another prison term and concerned about money — Werner was a good family man, with four children — he would talk to Mason Graves and drop helpful hints about missing pieces. Mason could not imagine that Werner Kempel would know nothing about the recent string of robberies, considering the eminence of the stolen work.

He had some trouble persuading Miyako to give him Werner's address in London. She sounded nervous on the telephone, devoid of her usual

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serenity. She had reason to be grateful to Mason. Miyako painted fake Oriental art on rice paper, and Werner had once shielded her from prosecution, believing her art was better than the original. Finally, she told him. Werner was in a boarding house in Knightsbridge.

There was fog in London when he arrived. There hadn't been a heavy fog in Blighty since the soft-coal ban, but there was fog now, gray as a dirty raincoat, the air warm and steamy. It put Mason in a bad mood, which worsened when he tried the telephone number at the boarding house, and was told that Mr. Kempel wasn't available. Mason decided on Plan B. He went to the National Gallery and tried to make an appointment with Hugo Barrows. To his surprise, Mr. Barrows was willing to see him at once.

Mason had met Barrows before, to discuss a security problem at the Tate, but he remembered a taller, stouter man with a face like the full moon. This man was stooped, his suit too large for him, his face drawn and ashen.

"I suppose you're here about the Cellini," he said. "I never thought I'd have the privilege of being the last person to view the piece."

"You didn't notice if the lock was intact?"

"I'm afraid not." He staggered slightly, and placed his fingertips on the desk to steady himself.

"Are you all right?" Mason asked.

"It's this intolerable heat," Barrows said. "Anyway, I can't help you. We have enough problems to deal with here. But I don't suppose you could know about the Rembrandt."

"Don't tell me! Another theft?"

"The self portrait, at the Tate. It happened only a few hours ago, no one knows but one museum guard and myself...I'm sure you realize the significance. Some syndicate is at work, ravishing museums everywhere, private collectors, too — I've heard rumors — You should be delighted, Graves, look at all the fees you can collect. You'll be a rich man before this is over."

"I'm not in the business anymore," Mason said grimly. "The Cellini job was an exception. But I think you're right. This is an organized effort, a blitzkrieg of some kind. But why? What are they after?"

"Some enormous ransom, I suppose. And we'll pay it, of course. They're terribly smart, these people, Graves. I don't think you have a

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chance against them. You say you've retired? Take my advice, and stay retired."

He sat down. The word "crumpled" flashed through Mason's mind. He wanted to ask more questions, but Barrows seemed like a man without answers. Mason turned and left.

In the anteroom, the elegantly dressed man on the bench rose so hastily that his attaché case slid off his lap. In the moment it took to recover it, Mason recognized Werner Kempel. Werner obviously recognized him, because his heels clicked down the marble corridor like the sound of a fast metronome. Mason ran after him, but Werner made it to the exit first. He was soon mingling with the traffic on Trafalgar Square, and Mason knew he was no match for an experienced fugitive. Instead, he hailed a cab and gave the driver the address of the rooming house.

Werner didn't return until three hours later, and gasped when Mason stepped out of the shadows to drop a hand on his shoulder.

"Is that any way to treat an old friend?" Mason asked.

In his room, Werner assumed his usual imperturbable air, but Mason wasn't fooled. Werner had been shocked to see him; Miyako had failed to warn him of Mason's imminent arrival. And finding the thief in the anteroom of Hugh Barrows's office required explanation.

Werner's wasn't convincing.

"It was business, Graves. The same business you and I have done. You might say I was 'consulting.'"

"About the missing Rembrandt?"

"Yes."

"Barrows said no one knew about the Rembrandt yet."

"Maybe it wasn't the Rembrandt. Maybe it was something else."

"You're a wonderful thief, Werner, but a terrible liar. You better work on that."

Werner said something in German, and it was obviously so unpleasant that Mason was glad he didn't understand the language.

"Why can't you leave me alone? You told me you were retiring! It must be three years since we saw each other!"

"It's five years, Werner — time flies. Except, of course, when you're in prison. I'm sure you don't want to go back there too soon, do you?"

"Why should I?"

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"And why should you be waiting to see Hugh Barrows, if not to make a deal with him for that missing painting?"

"Leave me alone!" Werner shouted. "This has nothing to do with you. Find your Cellini, Graves, that's what they hired you for!"

Mason felt as if his forehead had been tapped with a small hammer.

"How did you know about that? You're better informed than you ever were, Werner, and you haven't been out of prison more than three weeks!"

Mason extracted a billfold.

"All right. I'm prepared to pay you five thousand U.S. dollars, or the equivalent in marks or pounds or Euros or whatever you like.... No, we'll make it ten, if you can also tell me something useful about the Rembrandt portrait. I'm sure I can get my money back, if the Gallery gets its picture back."

Werner's color was changing. He had obviously sought out a tanning machine after his prison stay, but it was losing its potency.

"I can't tell you anything. I can't, Mason. They'll kill me."

"You were never afraid of 'them' before, Werner. Why now?"

"Because...it's not the same 'them.'"

"You mean there are some new players in the game?"

"Very strange players!" Werner said, his eyes round. "You wouldn't believe who they are, Mason. And if you ever found out, I think they would kill you, too. One life doesn't matter to them. A thousand lives! They've said it to my face. And yet, they're not criminals. I don't know what they are! I don't know why they're doing this!"

"Doing what, for heaven's sake?"

Werner almost seemed relieved to have made even this obscure confession. He stood up and went to a bureau. He rummaged among his boxer shorts until he found a folded sheet of paper. He handed it to Mason.

It read:

Van Gogh - Sunflowers
Picasso - Guernica
Renoir - Boating Party
Degas- Foyer of the Dance
Manet - Balcony
Matisse - Dinner Table
Botticelli - Birth

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Rembrandt - Syndic
Chagall - Village
El Greco - Baptism

The list continued, but Mason stopped reading, awed by the implication. He look at Werner, whose face reflected something like pity.

"Who are these madmen, Werner? What makes them think they can get away with this? "

"They've already succeeded," he answered. "By now, there have been a dozen other raids on the museums. They had to move quickly, you see, to make sure security precautions weren't altered, tightened up."

He reached for the list, but Mason snatched it back for one last scan of the targets. Sure enough, there it was:

Da Vinci - Mona Lisa

"It was the first to be taken," Werner said. "It was only an experiment, a trial balloon, they called it. They substituted a copy to allay suspicion until they were ready to strike."

"Jean Paul Mattrey said it was the original. Mattrey could never be fooled."

"Someone became nervous, afraid the discovery might alert too many museums. They replaced the original only a week ago."

"So you're a 'consultant' to this gang."

"They gave me no choice!" Werner said. "I helped them or I died. They offered to pay me, of course. They were indifferent about money, too. They didn't seem to care about either money or human life. I've met cold-blooded men before, but not like these people. Never!"

"Give me a name," Mason pleaded. "One name!"

Werner shook his head.

Mason moved closer, only inches from his haunted eyes.

"Then I'll give you one," he said. "Hugh Barrows."

He saw the flicker in Werner's gray pupils, and knew he had scored. He didn't feel surprised. Barrows was an icon of the art world, but gods have fallen to earth before, and Mason had witnessed corruption in high places more than a few times.

"Barrows took the Cellini, of course. It was easy enough for a man like him. He probably arranged the Rembrandt heist, too. And what about the Prado, and the Louvre? I'm sure they were both 'inside jobs,' too. Only the

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'insiders' weren't guards or custodians, they were people at the top..."

"I can't say any more, Mason!"

Mason knew he meant it. His sorrow was almost palpable. Mason started to put a comforting hand on his shoulder, but changed his mind. He pocketed the list, and went out.

The fog in Knightsbridge was like a steam bath. The sky above London was now yellow, the color of decaying egg yolks. It hurt to breathe. Werner went to look for a taxi, but there were none in sight. He began to walk.

When a black Bentley with outsize headlights drove up alongside, he thought the taxi had found him. Then he saw the two men in front, the third man in the back seat. It was almost comic, he thought, a scene from a gangster movie, until the man in the rear rolled down his window and smiled toothily.

"Can we give you a lift, Mason?" Hugh Barrows said, pressing the door latch.

Mason hesitated only a second too long. The man beside the driver was out of the car, a large man practiced in the art of forcible abduction. Without any struggle, Mason found himself in the back seat, confronting Hugh Barrows, no longer smiling.

"My friend Werner wasted no time," Mason said. "What are you going to do to him? Or me, for that matter?"

"Not what you think," Barrow said, with weary patience. He tapped the burly shoulder in front of him and the car drove on.

Mason tried not to think at all. If he took Werner seriously, he was headed for the countryside, to be shot and buried under dry leaves. He had obviously peered under the cover of a conspiracy, and he was a danger to the conspirators, but by the time they reached the small redbrick house on a quiet lane in Tottenham, he realized there would be an alternative.

A woman in a sloppy cardigan answered the door, and it took a moment for Mason to recognize the art critic Mildred Lucas, who looked as if she hadn't slept in days. He was brought into a kitchen where three large fans were going full blast, battling the miasmic heat. Three men in shirtsleeves sat at the butcher-block table and sipped cold drinks. They were unkempt and unshaven, but Mason was sure that one of them was Termson, the brilliant forger who should have been serving out his last sentence.

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To his surprise, it was the burly driver who took charge of the meeting, first ordering two of the electric fans shut off to reduce the noise; the request produced a rumble of complaints. He stripped off his jacket and threw it over a chair. Despite his bulk, Mason saw that he had tired, intelligent eyes.

"My name is Conrad," he said, the accent American. "Just for your information, I'm the only person here without any art education, and almost as little appreciation. For some eighteen years I was a director at NASA. I left to become an independent consultant in 1991. I have a son age twenty-nine who works for the EPA. I also have two daughters, two grandchildren." He swallowed suddenly, and Mason thought he saw tears welling up in the intelligent eyes. Or was it the bad lighting?

Mildred Lucas offered him a cold drink, and Mason accepted it gratefully. "I won't go into detail," he told Mason. "Time is short, and the details hardly matter, but I'm sure you've heard of something called the greenhouse effect. Just a year or two ago, the rate of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was greater than at any time in 160,000 years, and continuing to increase. The same was true of other gases, like methane, gases that trapped heat on the planet the way a greenhouse traps warm air. It was alarming, but it was also controversial, since not everyone agreed on the ultimate effect. It was much easier to go with the positive predictions. I did. You probably did. Most of us did. We all knew the Earth was forever.

"Well, three things happened this year. The rate of gas accumulation doubled in the first three months and doubled again in the second quarter. A Greenland project called GISP3 reported changes in the ice core so precipitous that they kept it secret until the top officials of the U.N. and three governments decided how much would be revealed." He stopped.

"The third thing?" Mason asked

"There was a meeting of scientific specialists in Denmark. It was billed as an innocuous conference on the environment. Its actual purpose was to decide if the accumulated facts pointed to only one conclusion. That within four, perhaps five months, there would be no more Rembrandts, Vermeers, Picassos, Goyas, museum directors, art critics, private investigators, ex-NASA officials...grandchildren."

He didn't wipe away the tear on his cheek.

"Men couldn't escape what was coming, the ever-increasing heat, the

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melting of the polar caps, the swelling of the oceans, the drowning of the cities and plains. Announcement of the end would only make that end crueler, panic would lead to desperation, riot, murder, misery beyond description. Oh, the world will know soon enough. But before that awareness, some of us thought — that even if man couldn't be preserved, perhaps the best of him could be. The only thing truly eternal about our poor species, Mr. Graves. Our art."

"The space station," Mason said.

"God knows who'll ever see our orbital museum," Conrad said. "Literally, only God. What alien life, what resurrected Man. But some of us said, let's rescue the art, whatever we can, without giving away the truth. Before desperate men storm the space station, trying to escape. That's what we're attempting to do, Mr. Graves, and we need friends, not enemies."

JEAN PAUL'S VOICE boomed in the empty gallery. He put his arm around the khaki-clad man as they walked to the Louvre's most famous viewing station, where only an hour before a small army of spectators had stood in awe of the world's most famous portrait.

"There she is," Jean Paul said. "She's relying on you, Mr. Graves. Do everything you can to assure her safety."

"You can count on me," the man said, placing his elaborate tool box on the marble floor. "These lunatics won't ever get their hands on her, not after I do my job."

The three museum directors, ten paces behind them, looked at each other in satisfaction, pleased that America's most famous security expert had been called in, relieved at the extra measures being taken to protect their priceless charges. But the room was warm; too warm for comfort, and they were grateful when Jean Paul Mattrey suggested a cool drink in his special apartment at the museum.

Alone with the Mona Lisa, Mason Graves found the proper instrument in his toolbox, and began the unhurried task of removing the painting from the wall.

"Come to me, babe," he said. "I'll show you the stars."

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John Morressy is best known around these parts for his wonderful tales of Kedrigern, but this month he's introducing us to a wizard by the name of Conhoon and a hero with a bit of a problem.

Conhoon and the Fairy Dancer

By John Morressy

LIKE ALL SOLITARY MEN, the wizard Conhoon of the Three Gifts had his likes and dislikes. The latter far outnumbered the former.

High among his likes was the unhurried consumption of a bowl of porridge every morning, an occasion for meditation upon his grievances and the decline of the world beyond his walls. Chief among Conhoon's dislikes was the disturbance of this or any other aspect of his life. When on a fine spring morning he heard a heavy tread approaching his cottage, he scowled into his almost emptied bowl. Nearer and nearer came the steps, measured and confident. There could be no mistake: a visitor was about to arrive. With a muttered grumble of annoyance, Conhoon scooped up the last spoonful of porridge, gulped it down, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, wiped his hand, in turn, on his beard, and dried his fingers on his shirt in case a quick spell requiring digital dexterity should become necessary.

He rose, still muttering, and started for the door. Before he reached it, three heavy blows set his house to trembling. Irritation blossomed into

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indignation. Pausing only to growl a quick protective spell, Conhoon drew the latch, flung open the door, and scowled upon a man tall in stature, magnificent in appearance, bold in bearing: a hero, and no mistake.

The stranger was splendidly attired in fine linen and wool and supple leather. A golden torc hung at his neck, and golden bands encircled his sculpted biceps and powerful wrists. With his left hand cocked casually against his hip, he stood with the other holding his spear at a jaunty angle of approximately forty degrees from the vertical. Undaunted by the wizard's fierce glare, he looked into Conhoon's face with composure.

Conhoon was no more impressed by heroes than he was by anyone else. "And who are you, with a knock at the door that near shook my house down?" he demanded in welcome.

The stranger announced himself in a voice that most people would consider pleasant to hear. It was deep and resonant, and contained no hint of affront at his gruff reception. "I am Corbal the Bold, greatest hero of this land," said he.

Conhoon looked him over suspiciously. "I have heard that name. It's Brugal's boy you are, him of the unfailing bow and unerring arrows."

"I am, and I seek the counsel of a wizard."

"Do you, now? And if you are Brugal's boy, haven't you an uncle, Blind Liam, who is a wizard near as good as myself?"

"Great and wise as he is, Blind Liam is no use to me, for he has a *geis* on him that forbids him to work certain classes of magic, and it is one of that forbidden kind that I need at the present moment. I seek the hand of the fair Noreen, princess of the Silver Wood."

Conhoon made a little snorting sound that might have been a laugh. "Then it's a long way you've come for nothing, and another wizard entirely you'll have to find for yourself. Conhoon of the Three Gifts does not work love charms."

As the wizard made to shut the door, Corbal the Bold stopped it with his hand. "I seek no love charms," he said, flashing a smile that shone like the sun on fresh-fallen snow. "Sure, a man like myself has no need of them. A glance from me is love charm enough to win the hand of the fairest in the land. It's surprised I am that a wizard as clever as yourself did not notice that at once."

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"Then go and win her," said Conhoon, "and cease to bar my door, or very shortly you will not be so good to look upon."

"I have already won the fair Noreen as my wife, and it's happy we've been for three years. But now I seek her hand."

Conhoon gave him a close hard look. "It's confused I am by your words. If this is a game, boyo...."

Raising his open palm in a conciliatory gesture and shaking his long auburn locks, Corbal said, "It's too wise I am to play games on a wizard, even an inhospitable one who keeps me standing outside his door without offering me a place to sit and a sup to drink after my long journey."

Conhoon reluctantly opened the door and muttered an ungracious invitation to enter. Corbal stooped to pass through, glanced about the untidy room, and seated himself on a three-legged stool. Conhoon took up the jug of milk that stood on the table and looked about uncertainly for a clean drinking vessel. Finding none either clean or dirty, he held out the pitcher to his guest.

"Have some milk," he said.

"It's generous you are." Corbal took the pitcher and drained it at a single draft. With a satisfied sigh, he said, "Long and far have I traveled, and my thirst was great."

"There's porridge, if you don't mind scraping the pot."

"I am not here to eat, but to win the aid of the wizard who can help me find the hand of my wife."

"And what is the problem with it?"

Corbal's brow darkened, and he said, "A wicked spell has been put on the fair Noreen, and her small white hand has been changed for a lobster's claw."

Conhoon looked interested. "It may be that you need do no searching at all, if you can have the spell undone."

"I know nothing of that. I know only that I am pledged to seek and search over land and sea, and through the air if that is needful, enduring all weathers and braving all dangers until I find the hand of the fair Noreen, whose beauty is such that the angels of heaven — "

"And will Blind Liam not help you?" Conhoon broke in.

"My uncle's power extends only to the birds of the air and the beasts of the wild wood, and to certain fish of the sea. If he tampered with a spell

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of the Good People he would be done in, surely. But he gave me good advice."

"And what did he tell you?"

"He told that you have dealt with the Good People."

Conhoon's brows lowered, and he frowned. "I have."

"They fear your name."

"It's wise they are to fear it."

"You've beaten them at their own tricks. There's few can say that."

"Few? There's none, boyo!"

"Indeed there is not. My uncle is wiser than any seven men in Ireland, and it's he who told me that no man but Conhoon can help me get back the hand of my fair Noreen."

"The Good People are a nasty tricky lot," said Conhoon.

"Well I know it. Wasn't it one of them who cast the spell that has my fair Noreen picking up her food like a smith using tongs?"

That was the sort of trick one might expect of the fairy host. They looked like angels, except for the few who chose to look like devils. The women were achingly beautiful and graceful as swaying flowers, the men deep-browed as philosophers, some of them, others as handsome as gods, or nimble as cats, and all of them with a quality that dazzled the eye and confused the mind; but they were a capricious lot, like willful children free of all restraint, as ready to blight a poor farmer's crops and strike down his cattle as they were to carry off a lovely child and leave one of their own withered ancients in its place; and all for the sake of a moment's diversion. Wise it was to avoid them, and wiser still never to speak their name, but to call them by a honeyed euphemism — The Good People, or The Noble Folk, or something such — lest they overhear and take umbrage.

"What did the woman do to offend them?" the wizard asked.

Corbal's eyes narrowed and his jaw set. "The People Outside Us need no reason for their wickedness. We offered them kindness and hospitality when they passed through our county. Their mean little hearts took offense at the sight of a happy marriage and a fine-looking husband and a beautiful good woman in her grace and generosity, and they played the trick on her hand. Then off they went, laughing and singing, worse luck to them."

"That is their way. The best of them is no good at all. It's fortunate you are that they did no more."

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"Is that your help to me, telling me to be glad things are no worse?"

"It is good advice. Are you certain, now, you did nothing at all to provoke them, neither one of you nor any of your household? Not a thoughtless word, or a careless gesture, or a sideways look?"

Corbal made an emphatic gesture of denial. "Not a thing itself. Their own malice was all the reason. We offered them food. One of them — a nasty sly piece of business he was — demanded lobster and we had none to give him. Dish after dainty dish we set before him, and the mean little sneak would have none of them. It was lobster or nothing for him. Finally he said, 'Well, from now on you'll always have a bit of lobster on hand for guests,' and made a funny move with his hand and mumbled something, and they all gave a great whoop of laughter and went up in a puff of smoke and a jangle of music to do their mischief elsewhere. And there was the fair Noreen with her hand like a lobster claw."

"Tell me, did the one who spelled her have a squinty eye and his nose twisted over to one side?"

"That is the one," said Corbal, glowering at the memory.

"I've heard of him and his tricks. 'Twisty Mike' is his name, and it fits his ways as well as it fits his nose."

"I will put another twist into him if I can find him. But the People Outside Us are hard to find, and impossible to see when they're found, and dangerous to deal with when they're seen. I need a charm to assist me, and you're the man to work the charm."

Conhoon's brows rose. "It's no simple feat you ask, boyo. The charm will not work unless I'm at your side when you face Twisty Mike. We could spend the rest of our lives seeking the fairy host and find nothing."

Corbal arose and regarded the wizard with disdain. "You'll not help me, then."

"Did I say so? Calm yourself. Blind Liam once did me a service, and I'm not your man to leave a debt unpaid. It may be that a word in the right place will get the job done."

Corbal's smile of joy and relief was like a ray of sunlight. "It's forever grateful I'll be to you. You will have more gold than you can carry, and the thanks of all my family. We will sing your praise at every feast and name all our sons after you."

Conhoon mumbled, waved Corbal's words off impatiently, and made

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ready to depart. It required little time. He took down a pair of thick woven belts with iron buckles worked in an intricate design. Fastening one about his own waist, he handed the other to Corbal.

"Do you take this and wear it, and don't take it off until I tell you to."

"It is too small to go about my waist."

"Then wrap it around your leg. And buckle it well. The Good People don't like the presence of iron. And the belt has a spell on it, too."

"Haven't you a charm to protect us?"

"I do. But when a man deals with the Good People, he takes all the help he can get."

A few bits of food stuck in pockets here and there, a cloak to keep out the rain and mist, and a spell to guard the house in his absence, and all was done.

"I will walk at your side to guard you," said Corbal.

"You will not. I'll not have you casting your spear and hacking away at everyone we meet."

"I must protect you from the perils of the road."

"It's little peril we'll face until we meet with the Good People. And when we do, it's no help you'll be. Behave yourself, and come along," said Conhoon.

Corbal fell in beside the wizard without a further word, and they set out the way he had come, turning left at the crossroads and heading for the mountains. The warrior strode on at a steady pace, his eyes alert for signs of danger. Conhoon shambled along, frowning at every rut and grumbling at every hill. Neither man spoke until midday, when Conhoon declared it time for a rest and a light snack.

"Will we find Twisty Mike and his crew this day?" asked Corbal.

"We might. And we might not see him for thirty years. The Good People are not easy to find."

"Then how will we find them?"

Conhoon tapped the side of his nose and looked very wise. "We will find someone who knows how to find someone who knows where they are. Do you not be impatient."

"Isn't it my own wife sitting home with a lobster claw for a hand, and you telling me not to be impatient?"

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"Be impatient if you like, then. Little good it will do you. Now it is time for my nap," said Conhoon.

He settled back on a mossy hummock, and in no time at all he was snoring. Corbal took up a posture of faithful watchfulness, both hands on his spear, which he held upright. In this heroic stance he stood guard until the wizard stirred and roused himself.

"Have you been standing like that all this time? Did you get no rest at all?" he asked.

"Heroes do not think of rest and comfort," said Corbal.

"It's a poor trade you've chosen," Conhoon said, shaking his head.

That evening they came to a small tidy cottage at the side of the road. An old woman stood by the gate. At sight of the wayfarers, she called out to them. Her words were indistinct, but the tone of her voice was suggestive of hospitality.

"What is she saying?" Corbal asked.

"That is not easy to tell," said Conhoon. "Old Mother McCrone has only a single tooth in her head, and that one wobbles all over the place. But she knows all that is going on for miles around. In her own good time, she will tell us where to find Mulhooley."

"Who's Mulhooley? Why do we want to find him?"

"Don't ask so many questions."

Conhoon called out a loud cheerful greeting to the old woman, who responded with a happy cackle and a flood of unintelligible but reassuring sounds.

"She's offering us a bite to eat and a sup to drink, and a place to sleep in her barn," Conhoon said.

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be with Mother McCrone. Come on."

Mother McCrone's words were indeed an invitation to dine, and the travelers sat down to a plain but hearty meal. The old woman urged them to eat their fill, but herself only gummed at a crust and sipped from a tiny cup of milk. She kept up a constant stream of chatter, not a word of which either man could decipher, and showed every sign of delight at their vague responses and hesitant smiles.

The cryptic conversation continued after supper, as they sat by the fire exchanging — as far as they could tell — pleasantries. When full dark

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was come, Mother McCrone took up a light and motioned for them to follow her out to the barn, where she indicated a generous heap of clean dry straw and bid them what they assumed was "Good night."

Conhoon returned her wish and settled himself into the straw at once with a sigh of comfort. Before Corbal could frame a question, the wizard was asleep and snoring rhythmically.

Corbal was no stranger to the world of magic. His uncle was a wizard of some repute, and his cousins had interesting powers that they called into use at opportune moments. He himself, when the battle-rage was on him, had the power to swell to twice his size and make fire dart from his eyes, gifts shared by his three brothers and an uncle. The women on his mother's side could weave pig bristles into a silk so fine that the light of a new moon shone through it like the blaze of the noonday sun and yet so strong that Cuchullain himself could not drive a spear through it. His was a talented family.

For all this, he had never seen the like of Conhoon's approach to the profession. It seemed, at the very least, unhurried.

Next morning, after a breakfast of porridge and milk, they made ready to travel on. So far, Corbal had not understood a word their hostess had spoken. He was nonetheless sure that she had said nothing about the Good People or the mysterious Mulhooley, nor had Conhoon, and this troubled him. He directed several anxious glances at Conhoon, and even nudged him in the ribs, but the wizard seemed oblivious to his presence. As they stood at the gate, Corbal by this time bursting with impatience, Conhoon said with a sigh, "I thank you for your hospitality, Mother. There's little of it to be found these days. Ah, when I was a boy, every door was open to a wayfarer, and he'd be fed until he could hardly move and put to sleep in a feather bed. But the householders these days...." He shook his head sadly, and Mother McCrone acknowledged his words with moist sympathetic sounds.

With a sigh, he went on, "We live in diminished times. The grand old ones are all gone. A shame about Mulhooley, isn't it?"

The old woman made a sound suggesting curiosity.

"I mean him giving up his trade and going off to live by himself in the mountains. A terrible waste, that is."

Mother McCrone threw back her head and exposed her solitary tooth

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in a wild hoot of laughter. She said something to Conhoon, pointed down the road, and then laughed again, louder than before.

"Do you tell me so?" said the wizard, marveling at her words. "The big oak tree, you say?"

She nodded vigorously and made a few odd noises, presumably indicative of amusement. The wizard thanked her one final time for her hospitality, and then turned and led the way down the road.

When they were out of earshot of the old woman, Corbal asked, "Why did you not ask her about Mulhooley yesterday? We could have gained a day."

"Do heroes know nothing at all?" said Conhoon. "Ask someone a question, and you give them the pleasure of refusing to answer. But let them think they're making you look silly, and they'll jabber on for half the day and tell you everything."

Corbal pondered the wisdom of that observation as they walked on. It seemed to him that the wizard's words succinctly described the conduct of nearly everyone he knew. This realization effectively prevented him from inquiring further about the mysterious Mulhooley. He saw no point in giving Conhoon the pleasure of refusing him an answer.

Everything became plain the next day, when Conhoon halted at the foot of a hill and pointed to a magnificent centuries-old oak tree at its crest. "Mulhooley," he said in a hushed voice.

"Is your Mulhooley a tree, now?" Corbal said. "How will a tree help us to get back the hand of my wife?"

"Am I an idiot, to go asking questions of a tree?" Conhoon demanded indignantly. "Mulhooley is no tree, he's a leprechaun."

"That is no leprechaun in front of us. That is a tree."

"Whisht, whisht, you great ox, or you'll frighten the little creature off with your bellowing!" said Conhoon. "He's sitting under the tree."

"I see nobody under the tree, and it's the eyes of an eagle that I have in my head."

"It takes more than the eyes of an eagle to see a leprechaun, and if you don't quiet down, there'll be none to see. Leave the talk to me," said Conhoon, starting ahead.

As they neared the oak tree, the wizard began to whistle loudly and clearly. The tune was unfamiliar to Corbal, odd and discordant, strange in

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its rhythms. The melody was so sad and beautiful that he thought he would never forget it, but each note vanished from his memory as soon as it struck his ear. When they were about five paces from the tree, a little man in bright green poked his head around the trunk and cried, "Conhoon, my hard man!"

"Ah, Mulhooley, it's grand you look entirely. Is all well with you?"

"Never better."

"Glad I am to hear it," said the wizard.

"Who's the big fellow with you?" asked the leprechaun with a wary glance at Corbal.

"That's Blind Liam's nephew. Corbal the Bold is his name. You can trust him." Conhoon gave a dry laugh and added, "You can trust him more than you can trust the Good People."

The little man's expression grew grim, and he shook a tiny fist at the mention of the Sidhe. "I wouldn't trust the best of them with a burnt stick, not that lot! And the worst of them is Twisty Mike. I'd love to raise a lump on his head would have him wearing two hats to cover it."

"And here's a man who'd be glad to help you," said Conhoon, reaching up to clap a hand on Corbal's great shoulder.

"I would indeed," said Corbal, his voice deep and slow and filled with quiet menace.

Mulhooley displayed great interest in this biographical revelation, and at the wizard's bidding, the three seated themselves in the shade of the oak while Corbal unfolded his story to the little man, who heard it with sympathy and a display of indignation.

"That's Twisty Mike for you," Mulhooley said. "Do you know what he done to me? I made him the loveliest pair of boots you ever saw, and he tried to stiff me with a purse of fairy gold."

Conhoon made a bitter snarling sound of disgust and outrage. Corbal looked at the wizard and the little man in confusion. "What's wrong with that?" he asked. "A purse of gold is a fine price for a pair of boots."

"Did your uncle teach you nothing, boyo?" Conhoon snapped. "Fairy gold turns to dry leaves when the sun goes down."

"Lovely boots, they was," said Mulhooley wistfully. "I was three years getting the price of them out of Twisty Mike, and by then he was claiming that they was used boots and not worth two pennies. And didn't

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all the fairy host take his side? Lucky I was to get anything at all. I wish I was quit of the lot of them."

"Why do you still make boots for them, then?"

"Ah, well, now, you see, they're me best customers. With their hopping and lepping and dancing and rushing about hither and thither they wear out the boots at a terrible rate, and even though they cheat me every chance they get, I have me own tricks. I make a decent living out of them — though I'd not want you spreading that around."

"Not a word will pass my lips," said Corbal.

"Nor mine," said the wizard. "Are you at work on anything now?"

Mulhooley sighed. "Trusting soul that I am, I'm making a pair of top boots for Twisty Mike. I got hold of a fine piece of leather, and I'll make such a darling pair of boots that even Twisty Mike will pay real gold for them, on the spot, and be glad of his good fortune."

"It's a forgiving man you are, Mulhooley."

Scowling, the leprechaun said, "I forgive them nothing. But business is business."

"Might I see this grand piece of leather?" said Conhoon.

The leprechaun rummaged in the bole of the oak and drew out a little chest from which he took a beautiful piece of Spanish leather the color of a walnut shell. It was as soft and supple as linen. He handed it to the wizard, who ran his hands over every inch of it, caressing it lovingly, murmuring indistinguishable words under his breath all the while.

"I'll be making a pair of dancing slippers for the king of the fairy host out of this same piece. And maybe a wee purse for the queen."

"Better and better. It's eager they must be to get them."

"They'll be here to collect them the very minute I finish my work, and they'll have the gold with them. Real gold, that won't change into anything when they're gone. Twisty Mike gave me his word on it."

"With those tiny tools, and the care you need take, the making of a pair of boots must be the work of years," Corbal said.

"'Tis no effort at all for a leprechaun." Mulhooley studied Corbal's soft low shoes and shook his head. "Them shoes of yours is an insult to your feet, my fine man. Now, I could make a lovely pair of boots fit for a hero like yourself, and have them ready in no time at all."

"A grand idea entirely," said Conhoon, beaming. "You'll have to

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finish up the boots and slippers for the Good People first, but we can make camp here while you work."

Corbal looked at the wizard in alarm and confusion. He had no wish to sit under a tree awaiting the completion of a pair of boots, however fine they might be; he wanted to be about his quest. But Conhoon ignored him and favored the leprechaun with his unaccustomed smile. Mulhooley seemed uneasy. He was faced with a dilemma. Conhoon was forcing him to choose between the leprechaun's natural secretiveness and his desire for the contents of the hero's bulging purse. He hesitated for a time, then he said, "Well, you know, I don't like people watching me work."

"We'll not interfere with your working, Mulhooley. We'll sit on the far side of the tree. Corbal will tell of bold deeds and adventures, and the famous heroes he's fought with and the great feats they've all done, and the great beauties they've rescued. I'll tell him about my visit to the sea-folk and the amazing things I saw in their kingdom, and all the wonders of the Castle Under the Waters, and the queen with the sea-green hair, and the rest of it. The day will pass before we know it. Do you go on with your work. We'll keep our voices down, and you'll never hear a word we say."

Mulhooley looked no happier at this reassurance. He thought for a time before saying, "A good story is a grand thing when a man's working."

"You can listen, if you like. You may catch a word or two, here and there."

Another thoughtful pause, and the leprechaun said, "Ah, now, why don't you just sit here by me, and talk away? It's glad I'll be for the company of two fine men like yourselves and an earful of good talk."

By this time Corbal's expression was quite agitated. He tried several times to whisper to the wizard, but Conhoon persisted in laying his finger on his lips, enjoining silence, and the hero could only fidget impatiently until Conhoon, with a bland smile, observed, "The boots and dancing shoes and purse will be finished this very day, surely."

"Oh, easily, with time to spare. No trouble at all," said Mulhooley.

"Isn't that grand? We can pay our respects to Twisty Mike and the fairy host. Pleasant it will be to see them all."

Corbal sighed with comprehension and relief. Mulhooley seemed less pleased. "Oh, now, I'm not so sure that's a good idea. The Good People don't like to be seen," he said.

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"They're always happy to meet a hero and a wizard," Conhoon assured him. "It's delighted they'll be to see us."

They settled down by the oak tree, the leprechaun to his cobbler's bench, the wizard and the hero to their telling of tales, and the day passed quickly and pleasantly. Conhoon, gruff though he was, could nevertheless spin a fine yarn. He had seen strange and wonderful things in his long lifetime, and once begun, he found it pleasing to recall and recount them. When the wizard took time to rest, Corbal employed his knowledge of the lore and legend of his land and its ancient heroes to tell of great deeds and feats of courage and daring, battles and single combats and the clashes of mighty hosts, and in as sweet and pure a tenor voice as was ever heard he sang songs of beauty and love and heartbreak and death and loss that brought tears to the little man's eyes and caused even Conhoon, least sentimental of men, to look thoughtful. Mulhooley, not to be outdone, twice laid his tools aside to add a story of his own. Thus they passed the day, and by the time the sun was at the treetops, Mulhooley had completed a splendid pair of top boots for Twisty Mike, an elegant pair of silver-buckled dancing shoes for the king of the fairy host, and a delicate purse with a fine gold clasp for the queen. And no sooner had he put the final touch on his handiwork, brushed the last speck of dust from the gleaming leather and set his work out carefully on a flat stone at his side, than the fairy host arrived. They came in an instant, all out of nowhere. A swoosh and rush of cool air, a shower of light and a rain of sweet music that filled the air, and suddenly they were everywhere in sight, dancing and twirling, gleaming and glowing, beautiful and sinister and otherworldly.

Ignoring the wizard, the hero, and the leprechaun, two men and a woman of the host pounced at once on the boots, slippers, and purse and snatched them up with cries of delight. One of the men, a stout imposing fellow with dark hair and quick black eyes and his nose twisted off to one side in a peculiar manner, sat on the flat stone, kicked off his shoes, and began to tug on the top boots, while the other, tall and stately, with a mane of white hair, removed his buckled shoes and inserted his feet into the dancing slippers. The woman, a green-eyed flame-haired beauty as slim as a reed, clutched the purse, opened and closed it several times, laughing in childlike delight, and held it aloft for all to see, crying out, "Will you look at the grand purse the little man has made for me!"

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"Happy I am to see the pleasure you take in it," said Mulhooley, with a low bow; which, since he reached only to her knee, momentarily removed him from sight.

"Grand slippers these are," said the king, placing his arm about the queen's waist and doing a graceful turn. "They make my weary feet feel like two soaring birds."

Twisty Mike stepped forth, placing his feet delicately and precisely, displaying the neatly fitting, brightly gleaming toes of his new boots. He twirled on his heel, gave a little hop, and declared, "The finest boots ever seen, that's what they are. You're the master of them all, Mulhooley, and you'll be long remembered for your generosity to the fairy host."

"Generosity, do you call it? I call it business," said the little man. "Or will you be giving me another handful of fairy gold?"

A great gust of laughter arose from Twisty Mike, the king and queen, and all the host around. "Generosity I said, and generosity I mean, my hard Mulhooley. Isn't it gifts you're giving us to make up for your past greed?"

The leprechaun turned a bright crimson and spluttered incoherently. Unable to contain his anger, Corbal strode forward, loomed over Twisty Mike, folded his mighty arms across his broad chest, and glaring down on him, said, "And what gift can I give you to make up for the trick you played on my wife?"

"Trick? Trick? What's this about a trick? If it's a trick you want, my fine lad, I'll oblige you." Mike made a peculiar gesture with his hand and stepped back, smiling expectantly. Nothing happened. He gestured again, more vigorously, and with no more visible result than before. His smile disappeared. Noticing Conhoon, who was looking on grim and silent as the recording angel, he said, "What are you doing in this? What's your game?"

"My game is protecting my friends, though it's little need anyone has for protection against the likes of your tricks. If that's the best you can do, you're a disgrace to the fairy host."

"And what do you know about it?" Mike demanded.

"I know that you tried to turn this strapping lad into a shoehorn for your own use and convenience, and when that failed, you thought you'd turn him into a berry bush. But I put a stop to that."

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"Did you now?" said the king, stepping to Mike's side. His manner was ominous.

"I did."

"Well, we don't like that."

"Don't you? And do you like your dancing slippers? Sure, they look more like hiking boots to me. Why don't you take a nice long walk and break them in?" said Conhoon.

No sooner had he spoken than the king began to walk briskly backward, an astonished expression on his face. "What's this? What's this?" he exclaimed.

"It's just the beginning," said Conhoon, turning his attention to Twisty Mike.

The outcries of the king as he bumped into trees and crashed through thorny thickets faded with distance. Mike looked about uneasily for a moment and then turned his most disarming smile upon the wizard.

"You'll not be angry with me for following me natural instincts, will you, now? The big fellow here was behaving in a very threatening manner, and I only did what I thought right to protect meself."

"And why shouldn't he threaten after what you did to his wife, and her doing all in her power to be a fine hostess to the lot of you, ingrates that you are?"

Twisty Mike's smile turned to flint. "It's hard words you throw at the fairy host, mister. You'd be wise to seek our favor, not our anger."

"Your favor isn't worth a handful of fairy gold and your anger is something that matters little to me. All I want from you, Twisty Mike, is the undoing of your nasty magic on Noreen of the Silver Wood." He felt a sharp tug on his cloak, and looked down to see Mulhooley. "And fair payment for the boots and slippers and purse."

Twisty Mike frowned, shook his head in a display of bewilderment, and said, "Who's Noreen of the Silver Wood?"

"She's my wife, you twisty-nosed blackguard!" Corbal cried in a voice like a trumpet. "You turned her hand into a lobster claw!"

"Did I, now?" said Mike, looking bemused by this news. "Ah, that one, that one. So I did. Well, wasn't I after paying an old debt? It was one of her ancestors, old Turga of the Three Nostrils, who flung out his feet water in the face of our king."

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"It's a lie you're telling!" Corbal thundered. "It is known throughout the land that for all his long life Turga of the Three Nostrils never washed his feet!"

Twisty Mike shrugged. "Then I must have been playing a prank on the lady. Have you no sense of humor, either of you? A fine prank it was, and no cause for anger or threats."

"You've had your prank. What are you going to do about it?" said Conhoon.

"Nothing at all," said Mike with a grin. "And that's more than you can do. I'll overlook your rudeness and effrontery, but the king of the fairy host is not as forgiving as I am. I'd advise you to be off now, before he comes back and plays a few tricks of his own on you." He turned to the queen, who was looking on with folded arms. "Isn't that so, my lady?"

She looked thoughtful, but said nothing, merely looked from Mike to the wizard with a faint expectant smile on her lips. Mike's grin faded.

"He'll come back when I send for him. And as for you...." Conhoon made a small gesture with his left hand. Mike's left foot began to tap. He gestured with his right, and Mike's right foot stepped out and back, out and back. The wizard moved both hands, and Mike broke into a simple tinker shuffle. "It's your king wears the dancing slippers, but you're the one who'll do the dancing. I hope you like to dance. It's a lot of it you'll be doing," said Conhoon.

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute, now," Mike said.

"Ah, you can do better than that. Give us a dance with a little life in it, that's the boy," said Conhoon, waving both hands vigorously.

Twisty Mike's hands went stiffly to his sides, and his feet began to move in an energetic fashion. His knees pumped up and down. He kicked to the front and he kicked to the back and to both sides. He leapt, and he skipped, and he stamped on the ground, and danced a ring around the oak tree while his companions looked on, laughing and cheering, clapping their hands, and altogether having a grand time observing the spectacle.

"It's graceful you are," said Conhoon. "And with the practice you'll be getting, you'll soon be winning prizes."

When Mike had made a dozen energetic circuits of the oak, Conhoon withdrew a short distance. Mike followed as if he were on a leash. When they were out of the others' hearing, Conhoon said, "Have you had enough?"

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Still dancing, Mike, who was slightly overweight and not in the best of condition, panted, "You'll...be sorry. The Sidhe...will make you...suffer...for this."

"Will they, now?"

"They'll not let their own...be made a joke of."

"Have you never heard the old saying, 'Nothing gladdens the heart of the Sidhe more than the misfortune of a friend'?"

Twisty Mike looked over his shoulder at the smiling faces of his queen and the rest of the fairy host, and heard the rhythmic clapping of their hands and the music of their merry laughter. Several of the host pointed to him and slapped their thighs in glee. Their actions suggested not anger and a desire for vengeance, but rather delight and amusement and cheerful approbation for the wizard's spell. When voices began to call out requests for favorite dances, like "Weasel in the Woodshed," and "Mooney's Empty Keg," Twisty Mike's face fell.

"Sure, it's true. And didn't we learn it...from the likes of you," he said, his feet still moving briskly. Conhoon did not respond. At length, Mike blurted in desperation and fury, "All right, all right! What...do you want?"

"First of all, Noreen's hand restored."

"Done."

"And Mulhooley paid in full, including all you cheated the little man out of."

"Cheated? Mulhooley, cheated? That little thief...!" Conhoon crooked a finger and Mike's feet moved faster, and faster still, until they were no more than an indistinct blur of motion. "But he'll be paid...in full...with arrears!"

"That's what I wanted to hear," said Conhoon, and with a broad gesture he released Twisty Mike, who collapsed on the turf like an empty stocking. Extending a hand to haul the gasping fairy dancer to his feet, he said, "You'll keep your promise, too. I trust you like I'd trust an angel."

"You do?" said Mike, with a sly look in his eye.

"I do. Hasn't the magic worked its way out of the leather and into your feet by now, the way you can feel it tingling all the way up to your knees? If you're ever tempted to go back on your promise, it's a long dance you'll do. Now I suppose I'd better bring back your king."

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"Take your time with it. The exercise will do him good," said Twisty Mike, grinning broadly. "But there's no need to tell him I said so."

They rejoined the rest of the fairy host, who seemed to have lost interest in their activities once Mike was out of difficulty, and drifted away to seek some new diversion. The queen came to Conhoon's side and said, "And have you settled your differences now?"

Conhoon and Twisty Mike nodded and said, "We have."

"Then I suppose you'll be bringing himself back to join us."

"He's on his way now," said the wizard.

"There was no need for a hurry," she said. "He puts on too many airs altogether. It does him good to be put in his place every now and then."

"You're a grand crowd, the lot of you," said the wizard.

When the king rejoined them, red-faced and out of breath and in a white rage, the queen and Twisty Mike intercepted him before he could speak and explained the situation. He calmed himself with a visible effort that Conhoon was pleased to observe, and then said to the wizard, "Glad I am that we were able to work this out in such a friendly fashion. You understand surely that no harm was intended to this poor creature Noreen."

"None at all, I'm sure," said the wizard.

"Only a prank," said Twisty Mike.

The queen, with a radiant smile, said, "Sure, any woman would be pleased and honored by such attention from the likes of us."

Conhoon withheld his instinctive comment, though it took an effort. Instead he said, "And I know you'll show your greatness by showering good things on the woman and her husband. Strong sons and beautiful daughters, fruitful fields and healthy cattle and long lives for all. They'll be known far and wide as the darlings of the Sidhe."

"Well, now, that's a little more than I think is fair," said the king.

"I trust you to do it. Mike, do you tell the king why I'm so trusting."

Twisty Mike drew the king aside and whispered a few words in his ear. The king's eyebrows went up, then drew down in a frown. He directed a long hard glance at his new slippers. But when he returned to where Conhoon awaited, he said with a thin, forced smile, "It's a grand idea. They're a charming couple."

And as he spoke the last word they were gone, no one could say where,

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for the fairy host is here and there, hither and yon and somewhere else, in the twinkling of an eye.

Conhoon felt a tug at his cloak, and looked down to see Mulhooley holding aloft a fat purse. "It's gold, Conhoon, real gold, the stuff that lasts. Well done!"

Corbal laid a hand on the wizard's shoulder in a comradely gesture and said, "I will arise and go now, and go to the fair Noreen, whose soft white hands are both once again in her possession. A joy will it be to me to hold them."

"And glad will she be to see you, but first there's a matter of more gold than I can carry."

Corbal took the purse from his belt and placed it in the wizard's hand. "Here is all I have. Take it, and I will send the rest."

"Ah, that's a fine lad, a fine lad."

"And I will return this fine belt and iron buckle," said Corbal, reaching down to undo it.

Conhoon stayed his hand. "Did I tell you to remove it? Hang it by the door of your house. It'll do you no harm."

"What about the boots? Do you not wish to stay until I make you a pair of boots fit for a hero?" cried Mulhooley.

"It's eager I'd be to wear such boots, but more eager am I to behold the beauty of the fair Noreen, and hold her soft white hands, and clasp her in my arms after my long absence. And then I must be about my business," said Corbal.

"And what is your business?" Mulhooley asked.

"Bold deeds, heroic battles, the inflicting and suffering of terrible wounds, feats of strength and courage, and the unending quest for glory: the work of heroes," Corbal said with a farewell wave. He set out with a firm stride to return to the realm of legend, where he and his kind belong. We will hear no more of him in this tale of trickery and mischief.

Shaking his head, Mulhooley muttered, "They're daft. All of them heroes is daft. But I suppose someone's got to do it, or we'd have no tales to tell."

"Give my regards to Blind Liam," the wizard called after the departing hero. To the leprechaun, he said, "Well, now, that was a fine day's work, wasn't it?"

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"Fine for you, maybe, but I've lost an order for a pair of boots," the little man said.

"I might be wanting a pair for myself. But only at a fair price."

"Would I try to cheat a wizard?" Mulhooley asked, his tiny face the picture of injured innocence. "Would I try to fleece the man who's just outsmarted the fairy host, and played their king and his trickiest henchman for fools, and gotten back for me my rightful wages?"

"Would you not?"

Mulhooley paused for a moment to reflect on the question, and then confessed, "In the ordinary way of things I would, but you made Tricky Mike suffer, and that gladdened me heart so that it would fill me with joy to give you the boots as a gift. But of course I can't do that now."

"And why not?"

"Haven't I lost the gold that hero would have paid me, and lost me best customers in the bargain? It's ruined I am." He looked up at Conhoon, wringing his wee hands, appearing smaller than ever, bent and ragged and pitiful. It is a trick that leprechauns have perfected over the centuries.

As he spoke, a light filled the air around them, and a ripple of sweet music coursed through the treetops. Three of the fairy host appeared before them, garments gleaming, long fair hair floating in the mild breeze of their passage from elsewhere. They looked around furtively and one of them said, "We haven't a minute to spare, Mulhooley. Can you make us each a pair of boots like the ones you made for Twisty Mike? I never saw him dance so well in all my life as he did in those boots of yours."

"I'll have mine in black calfskin," said one of the others, and the third said, "Calfskin for me, too."

Mulhooley held out for payment in advance, and submitted the coins to Conhoon for his scrutiny. When the wizard declared the gold to be genuine, the leprechaun quickly made his measurements. No sooner had he set a delivery time than the three vanished. The music of their departure faded slowly in the twilit wood.

"Oh, it's grand to have me customers back, and paying good coin in advance. It's a busy leprechaun I'll be all day tomorrow," said Mulhooley, rubbing his palms together briskly, "with three pairs of boots to finish and the money in me hand."

"Four pairs," Conhoon corrected him, seating himself and extending his large foot to be measured. "And I'll have mine in brown." ☙

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CURIOSITIES

CARNACKI THE GHOST-FINDER, BY WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON (1913)

MULDER and Scully are hardly the first fictional spookchasers to ply their trade in our genre. Long before these postmodern ghostbusters began to lift ectoplasmic fingerprints, investigators such as Algernon Blackwood's John Silence and William Hope Hodgson's unicognomened Carnacki, supercilious resident of No. 472, Cheyne Walk, London, were called upon to wrestle with occult entities. In only nine strange stories, Carnacki managed to outfox numerous supernatural visitors to our plane — ranging from a jealous spectral horse to an horrific Ur-swine, from marine demons to a disembodied giant hand — as well as expose a number of hoaxers. Recounting his adventures from the safety of the fireside to four cipherish pals, including the frame-narrator, Dodgson, Carnacki veered between humility and arrogance. Often he would apologize along these lines: "I don't suppose you understand what I am trying to tell you, but I cannot make it any clearer." But he always ended every account by booting his buddies into the street with a hearty, "Out you go!"

Carnacki favored modern methods of spirit-trapping, including his Electric Pentacle and, in "The Hog," a rainbow ring of seven varicolored neon tubes. But he also relied on the wisdom contained in ancient codices, notably *The Sigsand Manuscript*. Hodgson's consistent "mythos" — his enemies dwelled in the "Outer Circles" that ringed our terrestial globe — and his apocryphal allusions to previous cases plainly paved the way for Lovecraft, an admirer of Hodgson and Carnacki.

William Hope Hodgson (1877-1918) will surely continue to be remembered more for such masterpieces as *The House on the Borderland* (1908) and *The Night Land* (1912). But had his career not been cut short in the trenches of WWI, he might have plumbed deeper into Carnacki's ghastly career.

—Paul Di Filippo

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